Logic Modeling: Building A Journalism Department's Assessment Plan Using Accreditation Standards

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Abstract

Assessment in higher education has been a mainstay for years. Academic programs typically use their accreditation agency's competencies or university standards to write student learning objectives (SLOs). A journalism program might base its SLOs on standards set forth by the Accrediting Council for the Education of Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC), but other components are necessary in the assessment process. A logic model approach can serve as a visualization of the specific details of an assessment plan. This article discusses implementing logic modeling at a department level to examine how such a visualization process can guide faculty assessment teams to specify learning objectives using accreditation or university standards. With journalism and mass communication more diverse in the 21st century thanks to a changing landscape in technology and skills, it is hoped that the evaluation method of logic modeling used in this study of journalism education will help propel the conversation of assessment into a more immersive experience for any academic department and its faculty.

Introduction

Logic modeling is a useful tool to help evaluators describe and visualize the "program's theory of action" (Patton, 1997) or how a program will produce desired outcomes. Specifically, logic models illustrate assumptions about the resources needed to support program activities and produce outputs, and the activities and outputs required to yield the intended outcomes of a program (Cooksy, Gill & Kelly, 2000; Wholey, 1994). Logic modeling as a visual aid in social program evaluation has received considerable attention in recent years (Curnan & LaCava, 2000; Hatry, van Houten, Plantz, & Greenway, 1996). In the academic setting, logic modeling also has been applied in student affairs evaluation of university programs and activities.

However, logic modeling is an approach not regarded highly by university faculty, who construe that one must jump to the long-term outcomes of the program to evaluate the effectiveness of the program (Arnold, 2002) – especially when educators are asked to demonstrate the "impact" of their program. In many cases, impact is equated with long-term outcomes (Arnold, 2002). This tendency often leads faculty to have overwhelming, negative thoughts of conducting evaluations.

The beauty of a logic model, however, is that it outlines the different levels of outcomes that are expected from an educational experience. Logic modeling is a dynamic, systems approach to planning and evaluating what is ongoing in a curriculum. Through

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logic modeling, the program is being conceptualized in a nuanced way (Bennett, 1975). Using a logic model to demonstrate how and whether an assessment plan is identifying appropriate learning outcomes for an academic program can align more accurately the extent that learning is taking place. This information is useful for formative assessment as well as summative assessment. By articulating what the intended learning is and measuring whether the learning actually takes place, educators are participating in what Patton (1997) calls "reality testing," knowing whether programs actually accomplish in reality what we think they do in theory.

Assessment in the postsecondary setting has been a mainstay for years, but as universities increasingly modify their academic degree programs to include online delivery of instruction, the topic likely will rise in relevancy. For instance, for online courses to be effective, the learning objectives must be measurable and observable to both the instructor and the student. An academic program that is accredited by an external accrediting agency or council might base its student learning outcomes (SLOs) on the accrediting agency's or council's standards. For example, the Accrediting Council for the Education of Journalism and Mass Communications (ACEJMC) identifies 12 core values and competencies that it expects graduates of member units and institutions to have for professional careers in journalism and mass communications. One of the values, for instance, is "write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve." ACEJMC-accredited units and programs can write specific and measurable SLOs using these values. Assessment coordinators and faculty, as well as other stakeholders, can decide the courses in which the SLOs will be assessed. The challenge, therefore, is for units and programs to design and execute a learning assessment program that will be useful, simple and acceptable by all involved. Logic modeling can help with such a process.

This article discusses the practice of implementing logic modeling through a case-study approach that examines how the visualization process can guide journalism faculty assessment teams to specify learning outcomes using accreditation standards. A brief literature review of assessment and evaluation in journalism education is presented first. Linking assessment to accreditation, historically a "burden, an expensive and strenuous routine," can lead faculty

to solid practices of moving beyond data collection and analysis to use of the information (Driscoll & de Noriega, 2006, p. 8). The author of this article, in 2014, became the assessment coordinator of undergraduate programs in an ACEJMC-accredited journalism and mass communications department at a university in the Southeast. To reduce barriers that prevented effective assessment practices from being conducted, the author followed a developmental logic modeling approach to assessment, beginning with the formation of program activities that would encourage effective and creative assessment.

Recent literature: An evaluation of journalism education and practices

The practice of journalism evolved in the early 21st century with the development of web-based technologies that led to digital and social media platforms. This has led to examinations of the values, skills and knowledge that journalism and journalists should possess in the context of technological advancements. Shapiro (2009) classifies the attributes of journalistic practice, the journalists' criteria of quality or excellence, and the elements or principles of journalism to develop an assessment framework organized by five "faculties" (discovery, examination, interpretation, style and presentation). Each of these faculties has a set of standards (independent quality, accuracy, appraisal, edited and uncensored), as well as criteria of excellence (ambitious, undaunted, contextual, engaging and original).

The impact of local journalism on communities also is an area for evaluation or assessment. Napoli, Stonbely, McCollough and Renninger (2017) propose a three-level conceptual and methodological framework for assessing local journalism and the extent to which it meets community information needs. The study identified the three levels as *infrastructure* (the availability of journalistic sources), *output* (the quantity of journalistic output from the sources), and *performance* (the extent to which the output is original, is about the local community, and addresses critical information needs). After the model was applied to three communities in an exploratory approach, substantial differences in the journalism infrastructure, output, and performance occurred (Napoli *et al.,* 2017).

Further, evaluation of journalistic practices addresses the quality of work performed in certain news beats, primarily those criticized in the profession. Secko, Amend and Friday (2013) examine the criti-

cisms in the science communication and journalism studies literature that accused science journalism of producing inaccurate, oversimplified, and sensationalistic coverage to the public about scientific issues. The authors propose four models—science literacy, contextual, lay-expertise and public participation—to represent how science journalism can be produced from within different theoretical frameworks, providing a practical assessment tool for nuanced evaluations of the quality of science journalism.

Lastly, the emphasis on assessment extends to journalism education, in which the literature about how to improve student outcomes is growing. For example, in the United States, industry professionals have complained that graduates lack basic writing skills. In broadcast journalism writing and reporting classes, many television news professionals think student writing and other necessary skills for the industry need improvement. In a survey of television news anchors, reporters, producers and news directors, Eschenfelder (2020) found many students need improvement in areas including writing skills, finding story ideas, storytelling, and writing to deadline. Survey participants also identified the need for robust internships and instructors with relevant skills and training, all opportunities to enhance multimedia student outcomes. In a study focusing on public relations and journalism, Lane and Johnston (2017) investigated public relations and journalism writing courses across 30 university courses to identify differences between the two disciplines, and implications for public relations writing education. The study suggests public relations writing courses should adopt a bridging curriculum to support students to develop their writing skills in limited genres using authentic assessment.

Capstone courses to culminate the student experience in a discipline or field also are targets of assessment, since capstones tend to produce tangible and significant outcomes, but program directors disagree on what the capstone should look like. In a survey of department chairs and directors, Bowe (2020) examined the main goals, teaching methods, and subject areas covered in journalism and mass communication capstone courses, comparing capstone course content and format to what professionals say is important to know. The results show that capstone courses have become increasingly focused on individual coaching, the production of individual student projects, and the examination of issues related to careers and media in

society.

The assessment trends in the recent literature lead to a needed discussion of how journalism education should be evaluated. However, assessment is more than capstones and program outcomes; assessment should be a process in which a linkage between learning objectives and learning activities is aligned. To guide this part of the discussion, the next section will concentrate on logic modeling.

The practice of logic modeling

To determine the learning outcomes to measure in assessment efforts, a logic model can guide educators to connect the inputs and outputs of learning and assessment. Once the learning outcomes are decided, options for assessing the learning that takes place can be discussed. The assessment of learning outcomes can occur in many ways, depending on the course. Once learning outcomes have been identified, a brief but effective learning assessment tool can be developed.

Using a logic model as a visualization tool enables educators to link the program activities to what is intended to be learned (Arnold, 2002). For example, in 2015, the author of this article began the practice of organizing an assessment workshop for faculty in the department at the start of the 2015-16 academic year. The workshop appeared to help tailor the SLOs according to the ACEJMC values and competencies. In addition, the assessment coordinator sent emails offering teaching and assessment tips twice monthly to department faculty. These emails provided research-based approaches to writing module objectives, grading, and constructing learning activities. However, were these practices helping the department's assessment efforts? What other solutions could be employed? These were questions where a logic model served as a foundation in building a more effective and practical assessment plan for the undergraduate programs in the department.

An early proponent of program theory, Weiss (1997) simplified the elements of the most basic program theory model to consist of 1. program inputs, such as resources and organizational auspices; 2. program activities and their implementation; 3. intermediate outcomes; and 4. desired end results. Other variations of program theory have flourished over time. This study followed a logic model that consists of these elements: resources, activities, outputs, short-term outcomes, intermediate outcomes, and long-term outcomes (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2010).

For academic departments seeking to define the elements of their program logic model, McLaughlin and Jordan (2010) wrote that asking *how* and *why* questions can be helpful in the process, which also is known as forward and backward mapping. In addition, external influences, such as challenges and obstacles, must be considered in the program's context. For this case, external factors that could pose challenges to the journalism and mass communications department's assessment progress are faculty research and service loads, and low morale caused by budgetary concerns and other oversight policies.

The logic model for this paper (and thus the author's assessment efforts), shown in Figure 1, can be viewed as a network that shows connections progressing the program's major elements from one to another. Weiss (1972) recommended using path diagrams to model the sequence of steps between a program's activities, or interventions, and desired outcomes, which Figure 1 represents. This kind of logic model helps the evaluator (the assessment coordinator in this instance) to identify the elements to include in the evaluation, gauge where in the chain of events the sequence breaks down, and remain aware of any modifications in the implementation that might affect the pattern in the model (Weiss, 1972). In addition to path diagrams, other alternatives to express a program's theory or practice are program templates, which involve matrices arranged in columns; concepts maps, which display items spatially to indicate their relationships and similarities; and narratives, which are written descriptions of how a program is supposed to operate (Loucks-Horsley, 1996; Scheirer, 1996; Trochim, 1989b).

However, it must be emphasized that logic models are not rigid in their displays or specifics (Cooksy, Gill, & Kelly, 2000). Logic models can be defined generally as flow charts that display an arrangement or sequence of logical steps in program implementation and the achievement of desired outcomes. Because logic models are flexible, no single correct model exists for any program (Cooksy, Gill, & Kelly, 2000). The logic model components can vary, as can the assumptions be held by different stakeholders about how a program works (Greene, 1993). This aspect, which makes evaluation or assessment fluid and healthy, will be illustrated in the case study.

In this case study, the logic model created by the assessment coordinator for the department's program begins with an examination of tangible resources—assessment reports, assessment instruments, workshop presentations and emails containing teaching tips—that are collected and reviewed by the assessment coordinator and faculty. Furthermore, previously published literature was studied. Literature review in preparation of evaluations can help evaluators glean ideas on what other evaluators and program managers or coordinators have done to handle similar challenges, and consider other factors in building a program that can lead to information about whether a program approach is effective (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2010). These resources assisted the assessment coordinator in evaluating the department's assessment efforts and creating the assessment plan through the accrediting agency's values.

The assessment of student learning outcomes (SLOs) in this case study is one of the nine standards for ACEJMC-accredited journalism programs. Accreditation evaluations at university journalism programs normally are made by ACEJMC at six-year intervals. The SLOs specified in the assessment reports stem from 12 learning competencies outlined by the ACEJMC (Principles of Accreditation, ACEJMC website):

- Understand and apply the principles and laws of freedom of speech and press, for the country in which the institution that invites ACEJMC is located, as well as receive instruction in and understand the range of systems of freedom of expression around the world, including the right to dissent, to monitor and criticize power, and to assemble and petition for redress of grievances.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the history and role of professionals and institutions in shaping communications.
- Demonstrate an understanding of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation and, as appropriate, other forms of diversity in domestic society in relation to mass communications.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the diversity of peoples and cultures and of the significance and impact of mass communications in a global society.
- Understand concepts and apply theories in the use and presentation of images and information.
- Demonstrate an understanding of professional ethical principles and work ethically in pursuit of truth, accuracy, fairness, and diversity.
- Think critically, creatively, and independently.
- Conduct research and evaluate information by

methods appropriate to the communications professions in which they work.

- Write correctly and clearly in forms and styles appropriate for the communications professions, audiences and purposes they serve.
- Critically evaluate their own work and that of others for accuracy and fairness, clarity, appropriate style and grammatical correctness.
- Apply basic numerical and statistical concepts.

Apply tools and technologies appropriate for the communications professions in which they work. For the assessment plans, these 12 competencies are divided into groups of four, since the master assessment plan for the department operates on a three-year cycle. Specific measurable and observable learning objectives are written from these broad competencies, based on input from faculty at workshops. For instance, for the last ACEJMC competency on the list, the SLO became "Students will demonstrate the application of current digital tools and technologies." This grouping of competencies means that each set reappears every three years. The SLO might be rewritten for a new assessment year, but the spirit of the value is left intact.

The assessment coordinator then works with the department's faculty annually to determine which courses would benefit from the focus of the SLO and to develop the assessment tools or instruments to help meet each SLO. An assessment plan with three learning objectives is written for each degree program accredited by the ACEJMC (advertising, journalism, media production and public relations), approved by the faculty in each degree program, and submitted to the university's assessment office. The assessment coordinator communicates with the faculty periodically throughout the academic year, seeking any revisions or results to report. The plan results must be submitted each fall to the university's assessment office and, regardless of whether the criteria for success were met, include brief narratives on changes that can be made to the assessment instrument for the future.

Constructing assessment tools

Once learning outcomes were constructed from the ACEJMC standards, an effective learning assessment tool was developed for each SLO. The assessment of SLOs can occur in several ways. The observational method, for instance, can measure which students achieved a particular program outcome. Questionnaires, such as pre- and post-surveys, are another way

to assess learning and obtain immediate feedback about the effectiveness of a program in achieving its short-term outcomes (Taylor-Powell & Renner, 2000). In this case study, quizzes and tests, writing assignments, and group projects often were preferred by the journalism and mass communication faculty.

Each academic program in the department in this case study consistently met or exceeded the criteria for success for most of the SLOs, such as "75% of students will meet this standard," according to one of the assessment reports from the previous three years. This is positive news; however, the problem was not necessarily with the achievement, or a lack, of an SLO. With the flow of the logic model, two concerns were discovered in this program evaluation: 1. whether rubrics were designed effectively and 2. whether the assessment tools were modified. Some of the faculty did not use rubrics, while others discarded an assessment instrument after one or two applications if it failed to produce a desired result and tried another one. A few faculties who did not use rubrics replaced the instrument without determining how to improve it. Therefore, with the help of logic modeling, the program theory of the department's undergraduate assessment program was amended to design additional rubric training for the journalism faculty. Assessment workshops were conducted each semester, rather than annually, and email messages were designed more specifically around the topics of rubrics and learning assessment techniques. In addition, an online course for the department's assessment efforts was built in the Canvas learning management system.

The logic modeling process for this case study remains fluid, especially when evaluating the department's activities, outputs, short-term outcomes, intermediate outcomes in the assessment plans. A good logic model seeks to minimize any gaps by guiding the process and visualizing knowledge flows from outcomes, preparing for the next phases of evaluation that might surface. Since the department in this case study ties assessment together with its accreditation agency's values, the practice of following a logic model to comprise a complete evaluation cycle for the student learning outcomes was an effective and proper response to establish and advance an assessment program, which had not been present in the department.

Conclusion

Developing a logic model is a way for social programs to describe and evaluate their services. In an academic

Figure 1. Logic model for an accredited journalism department's assessment program
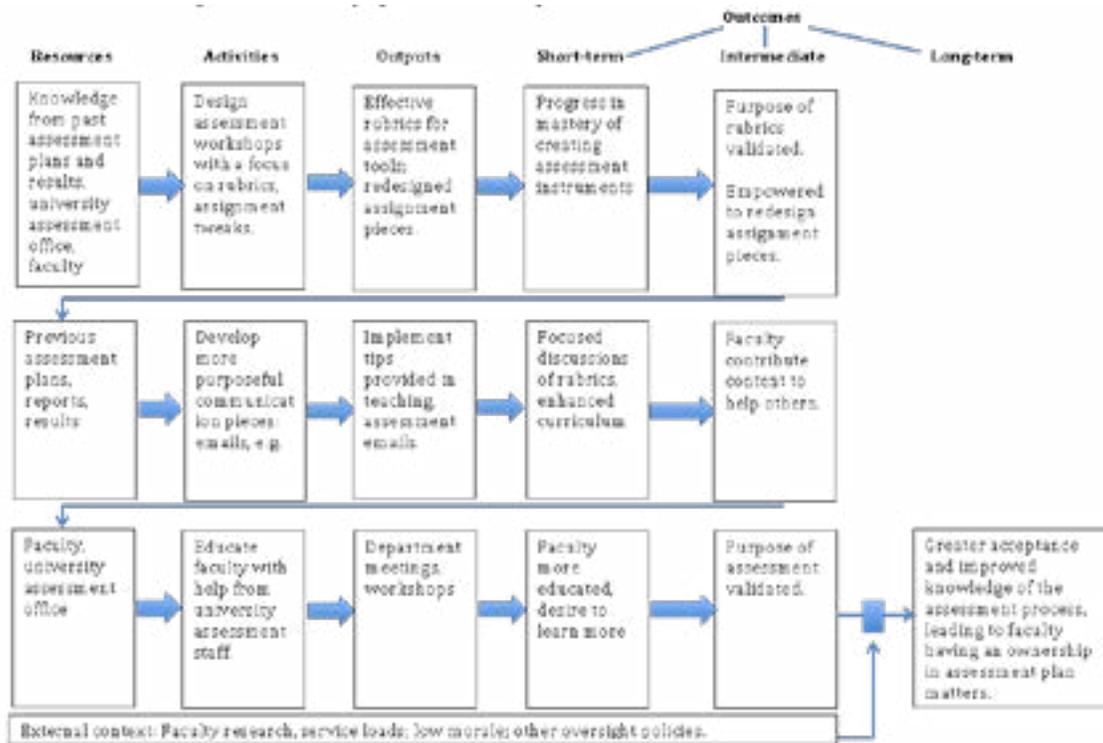
program, however, having to consider which elements to include and their linkage through the process often is the most challenging aspect in constructing a logic model for an assessment program or other activity. The logic model can serve as a basis for the assessment coordinator, faculty and the department chair to evaluate the effectiveness of the undergraduate program's assessment efforts. Academic programs that are accredited by a separate agency or council could apply logic modeling to align their accreditation standards or values with student learning outcomes. In moving through the process, each element is considered purposefully on how it links to the other. Through this manner, logic modeling can enable assessment coordinators and faculty to achieve a rich and robust assessment plan. By using a logic model to specify the learning outcomes for an educational program, assessment coordinators and faculty are able to measure more accurately the student learning that takes place. However, all stakeholders involved, including the university assessment office or other administrators, must be involved throughout the process to recommend any other information and details that might be needed to modify the model (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2010). Hopefully, the evaluation method of logic modeling used in this study of journalism education will help propel the conversation of assessment into a more immersive experience for any academic department and its faculty.

Further, building a logic model for an academic program, as opposed to a social program, involves a different composition of stakeholders. In a public or nonprofit program, stakeholders vary; some are internal, such as administrators and employees, whereas external stakeholders include volunteers, clients, and customers. These groups bring in a mix of perspectives that contribute to a shared expectation of success. This is not to say that diverse insights from faculty are not possible for an academic program; however, the process, at least in this case study, involved thoughts and ideas contributed mostly by an internal academic community of faculty. Nevertheless, more details and discovery are needed to strengthen the plausibility of the logic model for the department's assessment program in this case study, but this process should advance discussions for how assessment can be most effective in academic settings.

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