Assessment Drama

Coaching faculty members through the creation of an assessment report can be daunting. Headings like LEARNING OBJECTIVES, ASSESSMENT RESULTS AND ANALYSIS and ACTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT seem designed to make our intelligent and creative colleagues run for the exits. To prevent this exodus, I find it useful to compare the assessment report to a Hollywood movie in three acts. This has been surprisingly useful in quickly communicating the purpose and structure of assessment reports and establishes a useful metaphor for follow-up conversations. Here’s how it goes.

ACT I (GOALS)
We meet the characters, learn something about them, and (most importantly) discover their motivations. Perhaps the plucky understaffed Zen Cheerleading department has an ambitious goal of increasing student cranial illumination. Will they succeed? Stay tuned.

ACT II (ASSESSMENT RESULTS AND ANALYSIS)
Things get complicated in Act II, focusing on the obstacles that lie between the characters and their objectives. The unfolding story will include assessments of the situation (e.g. the Death Star has just appeared out of hyperspace), with graphs and numbers where appropriate. Much head-scratching and internal torment of the main characters will be evident as they try to understand what it all means. Maybe the Zen Cheerleaders have discovered that cranial illumination peaks at the end of the freshman year, and no attempts yet have succeeded in rekindling this flame. What to do? At the end of ACT II, we should be on the edges of our seats waiting to see how the beleaguered protagonists will ever come out on top.

ACT III (ACTIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT)
Here we require a satisfying ending, hinging on actions taken by the characters. To illustrate how important this is, imagine that the movie Star Wars had led us up to the moment where the rebels are considering how to save their base, and instead of the climactic final battle, the film ends with scrolling text: THE REBELS DECIDED THAT CONSIDERING THE CONDITIONS UNDER WHICH THEY HAD TO OPERATE, THINGS WERE PRETTY GOOD—ESPECIALLY WHEN COMPARED TO OTHER SMALL AND UNDER-BUDGETED REbellions. OR perhaps LUKE AND FRIENDS PLANNED TO DEVELOP A NEW RUBRIC THAT MIGHT GIVE BETTER RESULTS IN ASSESSING IMPERIAL WAR AIMS. Not satisfying, right? The key is that, as with any good drama, the characters have to do something, and the actions should flow from everything we’ve seen before this point. In the end it may be an uplifting victory, a tragic failure, or even a comedy, but something happens.

My father has a strange habit. When picking up a new novel, he will flip to the last chapter to see if he likes the end. If he is satisfied, he will start again at page one. I now do this too, but only when reading assessment reports. If ACT III (the section on actions for improvement) contains only vague pronouncements of future actions, or “actions” so general as to be meaningless, or actions only to change assessments, the report isn’t ready for the silver screen.

In conclusion, a summary of this article should be provided after careful consideration of the foregoing, with the intent of conveying additional meaning to readers. We anticipate that a scheduling meeting to begin this process could happen as early as spring 2015.


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