According to a recent Forbes article, data storytelling, which involves weaving data and visualizations into a compelling narrative, has become a sought-after skill in the job market. Today's variety of online tools and resources offer an opportunity to prepare our students to interpret their research in new and creative ways and to effectively communicate data-driven insights.

Getting started

There are several powerful examples of data visualizations that students can learn from. Tableau, a powerful online data storytelling tool, has a public gallery that students can peruse to gain insight into telling stories visually. Other unique data visualizations can be found on Gapminder's Dollar Street Project, which displays global public data in colorful, moving charts that make global trends and patterns easier to understand. You can also find many techniques and strategies for creating data visualizations on the Storytelling with Data blog, which provides tips, tools, models, and even an invitation to a monthly challenge for everyone to share ideas.

Once students become comfortable representing their data visually, they can begin to focus on storytelling formats. There are a number of ways to present information beyond reports or slideshow presentations. One popular example is the use of word clouds through sites such as Wordle or Tagxedo. Word clouds display words or short phrases in a list or body of text, in which the size of each word indicates its frequency or importance. The visual representation of the larger texts stands out to an audience and focuses their attention to the words/phrase rather than the number of responses. Many teachers and students have used this to represent class feedback or to show survey responses in a different way.

Telling stories with infographics

Infographics have become a standard way to tell a story, persuade an audience, and present facts and figures in a visually appealing way. Students can easily create their own infographics through online tools such as easil.ly, Visme, and Canva.

Teaching students how to weave a story around data visualizations is a great way to help them translate concepts learned through both data interpretation and the writing process. Students can brainstorm important ideas about specific content while interpreting and analyzing data. Those ideas can then be structured into a narrative or an argumentative form to highlight the points behind the data. Finally, students can think about injecting detail, emotion, or language to inform their target audience. With data storytelling, ideas from both literacy and math can
be integrated to help students move beyond the pie and bar graph report and effectively communicate their ideas in new and creative ways.

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