

Learning Stories: One way to assess and report —professionals and children working together

What are Learning Stories? And how can they be of use to us in our work of helping children to learn and grow?

OBSERVATIONS—IN THE 80s

When I first worked in child care in Sydney back in the 1980s and was studying what was then called the Associate Diploma of Child Care, I was told that observations were scientific records, and to be a successful observer I needed to maintain scientific protocols.

Observations were to be objective, concerned only with the facts or features of what I was seeing, not my thoughts or feelings, nor my perceptions of the child's thoughts or feelings. As an observer I should be discreet, so that the child did not know that I was observing her in case this altered her behaviour. I even had a standard avoidance sentence or two up my sleeve if and when she asked what I was doing ('Oh, I'm just writing some notes about my work'). Like a good scientist, referring to psycho-constructivist theory, I could decipher what I saw against a set of stages that told me what I should expect of this child at her age, and could plan for her, focusing on how I could affect her development in ways I knew to be appropriate. I might talk to her family but usually only if I were concerned that there was something wrong in that predictable developmental patterning.



ENTER: THE SOCIO-CONSTRUCTIVIST APPROACH

When I learnt about a socio-constructivist approach which challenges the notion of predictable, universally applicable developmental stages, it had a strong impact on how, what and when I observed and planned. The socio-constructivist perspective sees children as developing in a social and cultural context—not just unfolding like plants in a garden. This new perspective brought about a change in the way I see myself involved in Learning Stories (Carr, 2001).

These days, I no longer attempt to disengage myself from observations. I write in the first person and I write knowing that others will read the observation, comment on it, and add to it. I include context—the setting, the characters (including myself), what initiates this particular observation—and conjecture; what I as the author think might be happening, what I feel, and what I think others might be thinking and feeling too. I question my developmental expectations about a child. I don't observe and plan from a previously set schedule of focus children but watch and listen, allowing observations and plans to emerge. I involve my colleagues and the child and his family, seeking their comments and contributions to my observations. I am confident they will share information and ideas with me, assured that there is always other information out there that can expand and extend an observation.

LEARNING STORIES

I began to use Learning Stories as a way to approach observation or documentation which recognises this sociocultural approach. Learning Stories are narratives, not secret educators' business. They are written to be shared. The very nature of sharing means transparency and collaboration. But not every moment of every day that a child or teacher/researcher spends 'on the floor' will make a good Learning Story.

Writing a Learning Story is about recognising a good narrative. It is based upon something which troubles or excites or inspires or disconcerts me. I want to recognise and appreciate the drama and skills, mystery and challenge in what I see and hear. A baby rolls over and I am suddenly excited. How are we working together? An older child's continued efforts against all odds, at a construction piece, shows desire and achievement which is more noteworthy than another child's easy completion of a similar task.

LEARNING STORIES—JUST ONE WAY TO DOCUMENT

Are Learning Stories the only way to observe and document? No! Documentation intended for sharing is not exclusively reliant on Learning Stories. There are other ways to remember and record important moments and events: videos and photos can work without necessarily having to record a story; anecdotes or stories without photos can be valuable; conversations with children and with families recorded later or shared verbally with other staff can work as a basis for planning. A critical analysis of the environment alone is the basis for good documentation and analysis. Once I recognise a good narrative, it is not how I record it that is most important but how I use and share the information I have seen and heard.

Are Learning Stories the perfect means to document? Probably not! They are neither the only nor possibly the best method of recording. If we have learnt anything from sociocultural approaches it is to always critique; always ask how things are different from what we, as educators, assumed and expected.

LEARNING STORIES—A SHARED DEVELOPMENT

As part of a recent research project conducted in North-East Arnhemland, an Aboriginal woman explained that a child was recognised as gifted when, at the end of several days of his initiation ceremony, his body painting was still intact. This child's disposition is to be rather than do, to sit quietly and solemnly for several days, listening to the ancestral singing and watching the preparations (Gurruwiwi, 2010). I could use dispositions already described by Carr (2001) or others to define the possible opportunities for this child—concentration? persistence? patience?—but any attempts to 'fit in' like this may not actually indicate the depth of cultural knowledge the child is showing in this context, nor the depth of cultural knowledge I bring to my Learning Story. I need to check; I need to talk to the child and his family to begin to understand what they value as learning dispositions. I need to talk to colleagues so we can plan to support the further learning of the child, and our own further learning and teaching.

So what are Learning Stories? They are one way to document teaching and learning which goes beyond secret, objective information used to assess a child against a set of norms. They are of use to us in our work of helping children learn and grow because the shared and transparent nature of Learning Stories unsettles our preconceived ideas and categories that we have used to describe children and their development. Observation through Learning Stories and other documentation is truly about what I can learn from the child, what the child is learning, and how we can go on together.

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