

# Using document panels to record, reflect, and relate learning experiences

by Yomi Ogunnaike-Lafe and Joan Krohn

Assessment is a hotly contested issue in education today. The education policy No Child Left Behind (NCLB) emphasizes standardized testing throughout a child's schooling as a major means of assessment. Even at Head Start an attempt was made at standardized testing, the National Reporting System (NRS). Although research indicates that these children do not yet have the literacy skills for paper and pencil testing, the government is nevertheless interested in assessing very young children. National focus is also turning toward the impact of early learning on later school success:



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- The National Early Literacy Panel (NELP) has found direct links between certain early skills like phonemic awareness and alphabet knowledge and later proficiency in literacy.
- Learning standards and benchmarks are widely used in early childhood programs to guide curriculum and classroom practices (Bodrova, Leong, & Shore, 2004), with an ultimate goal of ensuring high academic performance.
- Parents, school districts, and government officials want to know how programs meet the learning needs of our youngest citizens, particularly in districts where funding is dependent on performance.

How then should early childhood teachers account for children's performance especially in classrooms where it seems that "all the children do is play"? How do we as educators share the value of our curriculum, teaching strategies, observations, goal-setting, and goal assessments? How can we interpret our classroom practice for those unfamiliar with the learning process in early childhood? This article explores these questions through the use of document panels, a powerful tool used in capturing the process of learning in early childhood classrooms.

## Learning and the use of document panels

Experts in early childhood education emphasize the importance of a play-based curriculum in promoting growth and development during the early years (Gestwicki, 2005). Children learn through active, multi-sensory manipulation and experimentation. If you stepped into an early childhood classroom such active manipulation and investigation would look like play, and it is. Tovah Klein in an article titled "Play: Children's Context for Development" states:

"Enrichment and growth naturally evolve from playing as children learn about themselves and their surroundings. A child's active participation in his or her world facilitates mastery and control, leading to feelings of competence and self-efficacy. Both contribute to young children's sense of self. The internal excitement derived from discovery and mastery nurtures children's innate desire to learn" (p. 28).

The skills acquired through play can then be captured, shared, and appreciated for their worth through document panels. Skills outlined in learning standards and benchmarks can be clearly

delineated and described for everyone, from district superintendents to the children themselves through the use of panels. Thus, document panels mesh the formality of standards and benchmarks with the informality of learning through play.

### Document panels: Role and creation

Margie Carter and Deb Curtis (1996) consider document panels to be powerful tools used in relating the process and essence of learning in our early childhood classrooms, particularly, where children are busy constructing, reviewing, and applying knowledge. In their book *Spreading the News: Sharing the Stories of Early Childhood Education*, Carter and Curtis (1996) write:

“Document panels display the growth of a curriculum idea and the evolution of thinking, understanding, and skill development among the children. They are also an effective communication tool with parents. The panels are visual displays that tell the story of the life evolving in the classroom. Creating document panels provides evidence of the importance and value of childhood and alleviates concerns that there may not be learning in play” (p. 9).

Anyone who has ever visited an early childhood classroom knows that learning occurs everywhere in the room at a very rapid pace. Speaking, reading, writing, listening, negotiating, and role-play, to mention a few, are part of the natural daily flow of typical preschool classrooms. Capturing every moment of learning that transpires in our preschool classrooms would be impossible. However, we can record, reflect, and relate crystallized moments in this flow of learning. Document panels:

- Provide the structure for defining the outcome of this learning process.

- Are assessment tools in that they depict how, through play, the educator supports children’s efforts in meeting required learning standards and benchmarks.
- Must be put together as a composite — of photographs and comments. If the panel is made up of only photographs, viewers would be pleased by the sight of beautiful children at play, without the interpretation of the tremendous quality of learning reflected therein. Similarly, if the panel contains only children’s comments and discussion, it may not be visually attractive to others. In particular, the children themselves may not be able to look at it and reflect on their learning. Both photographs and comments must be present to capture the learning experience.

### The three R’s

To create meaningful document panels, the educator must remember the three R’s: Record, Reflect, Relate.

**Record.** The educator must record ongoing learning, photograph the action, and jot down observations, children’s comments and idea sparkers to aid memory when creating the panel.

**Reflect.** In a quiet place, recall the learning event.

- Look over the photographs, print the best ones, read over observation notes and children’s comments, and review benchmarks that guided the lesson.
- Decide which of the photographs most powerfully capture the action and learning to be conveyed.
- Type the children’s comments.
- Reflect on the benchmarks that drove this experience and how they were met. Write a brief discussion section related to the connection

### Quick reminders for creating document panels

1. Arrange pictures, title, and typed comments on a large piece of tag board.
2. Place the Discussion section (that specifically points out the learning that took place) in the lower right hand corner of the tag board. This helps readers, because the upper left and lower right hand corners are the most visually attended to.
3. Use torn or cut shapes and colors behind your photos and comments to add color and interest. Remember, keep it simple. For further details and insights about putting together document panels, consult Carter and Curtis’ text “Spreading the News: Sharing the Stories of Early Childhood Education.”
4. Laminate the entire tag board. Laminating is a wonderful way to preserve document panels. Contact paper could also be an alternative. Document panels hung at children’s eye levels are touched, turned around, and manipulated quite often.
5. Use digital cameras to simplify the process of taking photographs. You can view, select, and print out photographs in a very short time. Arranging the panel can be the most time-consuming part, but with practice they come together more quickly. From start to finish, a document panel takes about an hour.

In summary, document panels capture any learning experience, regardless of the curriculum or lesson taught.

between the photographs, children's comments, and specific benchmark(s).

- Strive to make the discussion concise, informative, and fun. It should be an aha! moment for your readers. Document panels should not contain educational jargon unless they are prepared specifically for a 'technical' audience.

**Relate.** Now that the document panel has been created, relating information about learning is next. Document panels should be displayed in a high traffic area; for instance, out in the hallway for children, parents, and staff to see. What ends up happening is that children and adults utilize the panels as conversation starters.

- Parents can converse with their children about what they see in the pictures and the comments that they read.
- Staff members and administrators can pause and read the panel and in a short time understand the how, what, and why of the learning that took place.
- Children themselves have the opportunity to reflect upon and discuss the panel. This is an important skill that would be impossible for young children without the visual cues as a reminder.

A wonderful example of the importance of sharing panels in a high traffic area happened in the second author's preschool program. One of the document panels titled "Learning, It's What's for Lunch" made up of photographs of children conversing about food, flight, and other wonderful ideas during lunch, hung in the hallway. On this particular day, the food service administrator walked through the hallway, paused to look at the panel, and came in to ask if she could obtain a copy. She wanted to hang the panel in the central kitchen to remind her staff of the important role they play in the education of young children.

## Benefits of documentation

For Administrators:

- another form of qualitative research in early childhood
- validation that learning actually takes place in early childhood classrooms
- appreciation for the significance of play during the early years
- problem solving opportunity, such as determining total cost of ingredients

For Parents:

- renewed appreciation for the role of play in early childhood
- learn about the skills acquired through simple daily activities
- feel empowered in their role as their children's first teachers

For Early Childhood Professionals:

- children have wonderful ideas that adults can learn much from
- no learning is useless; every idea, thought, has potential
- a wealth of learning transpires in the early childhood classroom
- play is essential for learning in early childhood classrooms

## Conclusion

Document panels share concrete evidence to administrators, staff, and parents about the valuable learning that goes on in seemingly simple events. To early childhood educators play is serious business. We are purposeful in creating learning environments and continue to assess their impact on children's experiences and adventures. Through active observation, use of open-ended questions, dialogues, and documentation, we share information about children's meaningful engagement in play and the process of acquiring knowledge about the world within and outside of the classroom. Document panels are a way to record, reflect, and relate that knowledge.

Document panels are limitless because children's minds are limitless. You can capture a lesson as it is happening no matter where it takes you. Document panels channel your creativity and challenge your ability to interpret for others the important work of early childhood play. As Carter and Curtis explained, "Spread the news, share the stories of early childhood education" (Carter & Curtis, 1996). So with camera and clipboard at hand, dive into using document panels to capture learning through play.

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## Document Panel 1: Children, Children What Do You Hear?

Having read *Polar Bear, Polar Bear What Do You Hear?* (Martin & Carle, 1991), we made our own version titled "Children, Children, What Do You Hear?" To do this, we went on a hike through the woods south of our pre-school. Upon our return to school, the children drew these images which were later assembled into a book to share with families. Using photographs of the children hiking and drawing, photographs of the various objects heard, and a brief discussion, a document panel was created. This experience highlighted the following things:

- Using our senses helps us understand the world
- Information can be collected
- Remembering collected information gives us ideas for drawing and writing
- Sharing the book we made with our families helps us remember learning
- Many people can work together to make one book that is shared

**Content Standard:** Students will read and respond to a wide range of writing to build an understanding of written materials, of themselves, and of others.



Per. Standard	Pre-K Benchmark	Theme	Skills
A4.2 – Read, interpret, and critically analyze literature.	Listen to and interpret literature	After reading <i>Polar Bear, Polar Bear What Do You Hear?</i> we wanted to make our own book. We took a hike in the woods to discover what we could hear. In the panel I included photos of items the children pointed out that they heard. We recorded their statements and these are used to caption the pictures. Since the panel already told a story, I did not include a discussion section. I also made a book with the photos and captions to share among the families.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• listening for and describing sounds in the environment</li> <li>• discuss the story</li> <li>• determine a way to write a similar story</li> <li>• create a list of sounds heard on the hike</li> <li>• assist in creating <i>Children, Children What Do You Hear?</i> to share with families</li> </ul>
E4.5 – Analyze and edit media work as appropriate to audience and purpose.	Reflect on literature.		
F4.1 – Conduct research and inquiry on self-selected or assigned topics, issues, or problems and use an appropriate form to communicate their findings.	Participate in collecting information		
E4.4 – Demonstrate a working knowledge of media production and distribution.	Produce written material to share.		

## Document Panel 2: Tree House

The book, *Henry and Amy: Right-Way-Round and Upside Down* (King, 1998), was read during circle time. In this story, Henry and Amy worked together to build a treehouse. One of the children commented, "I wish we could build one." Since there were no big trees in this preschool program, the teacher said, "Well, that would be fun but look we don't have a big tree." To which another child responded, "We could use the slide." Thus began a child-directed, literature response project. The children decided on the materials needed for this project: lots of paper, tape, scissors, markers, and crayons. A document panel was created using photographs, children's comments, and branches and leaves for the background. This experience showed:

- Books contain good ideas that you can make your own.
- Children are able to make up plans for adults to follow.
- Working together as a team brings joy.
- It sometimes takes two people to pull and cut masking tape.
- You can use words to get someone to follow your plan.
- Paper tree houses don't last forever and that's okay.



**Content Standard:** Students will read and respond to a wide range of writing to build an understanding of written materials, of themselves, and of others.

Per. Standard	Pre-K Benchmark	Theme	Skills
A4.3 – Read and discuss literary and non-literary texts in order to understand human experience.	Interpret various forms of writing or illustrations to understand human experience.	In the story <i>Henry and Amy</i> , characters build a treehouse. One of the children, Zach, said he wished we could build a treehouse. This panel shows the steps the children took to build their treehouse. I included the children's words and showed the many lessons learned. One of the main lessons is that children have good ideas that adults can follow.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interpreting text and illustration to formulate an idea.</li> <li>• Understanding the experience of the characters and devising a way to recreate it.</li> <li>• Planning, discussing, and compromising ideas on how to build a treehouse.</li> <li>• Using conversation as a means to work cooperatively and share materials.</li> <li>• Communicating to other children and adults what the structure was.</li> <li>• Describing the experience using feeling words of seeing the treehouse torn down.</li> </ul>
B4.2 – Plan, revise, edit, and publish clear and effective writing.	Plan, draw, and write.		
C4.1 – Orally communicate information, opinions, and ideas effectively to different audiences for a variety of purposes.	Express self using words and expanded sentences. Actively participate in conversation.		
C4.2 – Listen to and comprehend oral communication.	Understand and follow oral directions.		