

Learning stories: Assessment through play

by Michael Reisman

Why do we assess children in the early childhood center?

- What is the goal?
- Who is it for?
- Do we have an ethical responsibility to children when we assess their learning?

Many teachers operate under the assumption that assessment is the list of information gathered on children's skills and abilities, according to developmental benchmarks organized into categories that are similar to curriculum goals. As a preschool teacher for six years, I have always struggled with the kinds of conversations these checklists provoke. When parents come in for a conference to see the list, they tend to focus on whatever boxes have *not* been checked off and, regardless of explanation, conclude that the empty boxes must be what 'we' need to work

on. They assume that the unchecked boxes imply deficit. A conversation about abilities and successes quickly changes to what the child *is not* doing at school and how they can improve.

I found this process completely impractical from day to day. Checklists are rearranged for use: David is playing pretend with Hillary and they are negotiating roles. Check the box in the social-emotional category. In our small group counting game Chad counted to 18, Michael to 12, Daniel to 6, and Laura to 4. Check. Whatever gets missed or is unobserved in the group will be assessed in a one-on-one environment of tests disguised as games to make sure that every child has an equal opportunity to *get it right*. In this process, the assessment is removed from the play environment, removed from the relationships. The checklists do not represent the children factually or accurately, although they are presented under the auspices of 'objectivity.' Every aspect of the learning process is abstracted from context. The results attend the negative: the *not-as-of-yets*, and the *having-difficulty-withs*.

After two-and-a-half years of this I had enough. How do checklists *serve* us in our quest to cultivate confident, communicative young children who exhibit a

zeal for learning? They do not. So how can we lovingly and accurately assess the development of young children in the early childhood setting? The answer comes from New Zealand.

Why learning stories?

When we think about our roles as teachers of young children, what do we look for when we observe children? Simply put, we want to know children, and we want them to know us and each other. If we are to sit with families to discuss the lives of their children and what directions they might be heading, what arenas of thought and dialogue are valuable to us?

Research has indicated that early educators and children benefit most from *formative assessment*. Formative assessment provides us evidence to inform the curriculum (Black & Wiliam, 1998). An assessment is considered formative when the feedback from learning activities is used to adapt the teaching to meet the learner's needs. *Summative assessment*, like a report card, comes at the end of a term or project. Learning stories are formative assessments.

The learning story assessment, adapted from the oral documentation traditions of New Zealand's indigenous Maori people,



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was formally developed by such researchers as Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee (Dreaver, 2004). New Zealand's national, bicultural early childhood program is governed by a holistic view of growth:

“... development and learning have affective, social, and motivational dimensions and assessment does too” (Carr, 2007). Many teachers in the U.S. would agree that their own vision for children is for them to be “competent and confident learners and communicators, healthy in mind and spirit, secure in their sense of belonging, and in the knowledge that they make a valued contribution to society” (Carr, 2007, p. 5).

The learning story assessment acknowledges the unpredictability of development and the perspective of the learner, as well as contributes to the child's dispositions and honors the early childhood setting as a learning community. Learning stories demonstrate the value of the narrative approach over benchmarks, as well as provide a multitude of opportunities for young children to self-assess (Carr, 2001).

With learning stories, children's choices and languages show us where we are now, and point us in the directions we could be going. We only need to know what to look for.

What is a learning story?

A learning story narrates the learning process, as well as children's choices *toward* learning. As we see in the example, the observer recognizes a call to learning and becomes the recorder and interpreter. The learning story is comprised of contributions by all of the major players in the child's culture and community, and reflects the circle of experience that surrounds and includes the lives of us and our children: choices, teachers, friends, folks, and language. We are there with the children, camera in hand.

What we look for in the learning story assessment are dispositions toward learning:

Participation repertoires from which a learner recognizes, selects, edits, responds to, resists, searches for, and constructs learning opportunities . . . being ready, willing, and able to participate in various ways: a combination of inclination, sensitivity to occasion, and the relevant skill and knowledge. (Carr, 2007)

Carr (2001, p. 20) identifies learning dispositions for the purposes of assessment through five characteristics:

- 1) Taking an interest
- 2) Being involved
- 3) Persisting with difficulty
- 4) Communicating with others
- 5) Taking responsibility.

These five characteristics serve as guides for perspective: what to look for in order to better see and hear the children. These are not to be confused with *benchmarks*. We want to see *how* they take an interest, *how* they persist with difficulty, not whether or not they do. As teachers, observers, and interpreters, we are not judges. We have the responsibility to provide meaning in enough detail as to allow *everyone* an opportunity to really see and know these children. The children absolutely depend on us for this.

Convention: Initiative → Engagement → Intentionality

A video camera that records audio is optimal for capturing the footage for the learning story, but still photography and a very quick pen will do the trick as well. The key is to capture and describe the narrative flow of action and language, verbal and non-verbal, as it happens. Pictures are very important because children like pictures in their stories and they can show the sequence of events along with the narrative. Children who do not read words CAN read pictures.

Tom Drummond (retired) of North Seattle Community College in Seattle, Washington, describes how to begin writing learning stories:

- 1) Begin with your own interest in what



“Who wants to build a castle?” he asked as his eyes peered in a circle around his periphery.

“I do!” Ian proclaimed from up in the loft. I grabbed my camera and nestled into the corner of the block area with pen and paper to record this construction to history.

Dietrich and Ian promptly got to work, first using the biggest of our blocks, with the four semi-circles cut out, as a floor platform. Dietrich placed the triangular blocks in an almost symmetrical design, laying them down and standing them upright, resembling the decorative spires of Gothic castle architecture. Cylinders were also employed to resemble columns. Dietrich stood the cylinders upright in different spots, trying them out in different placements to see how they would look best.



Blocks are being stacked on top of each other at Dietrich's side of the castle, leaning up against each other simply

by the nature of how they were stacked.

"These are the cannons," Dietrich said to the teacher, "Look, I wanna show you. The cannons shoot like this, *pshooh!*" Dietrich motions out of the cylinders up at the top. The cylinder falls over and Dietrich replaces it. It may have been this movement of the blocks that causes one of Ian's castle blocks to fall. Ian replaces it as well with no trouble at all.

the child has taken the initiative to do, and talk about yourself in the first person.

- 2) Describe what the child does and says from your perspective as someone who cares and is listening closely to discover what is happening.
- 3) Title a paragraph "What it means" and write about the significance of what you saw. Make meaning in dialogue with other teachers.
- 4) Title a paragraph "Opportunities and Possibilities" and describe what can be provided next to extend learning and imagine what the future may hold.
- 5) Offer a blank page for the family to respond with their views.
- 6) Include a title for the story.

In this example, the teacher helped to facilitate communication and participation for Kealan, spurring a conversation about how sometimes we do not hear each other unless we speak up. This is a prime example of how learning stories represent and assess learning in the classroom as a community. We cannot *be* without each other, so we are sure to

employ assessment that incorporates our relationships — friends, teachers, families, and materials.

What it means

Meaning is best determined by the team of teachers/providers in the children's lives. In our provided story of Dietrich, Ian, and Kealan, the teachers saw and heard friends sharing materials and working toward a common architectural idea: the castle.

When we are looking for meaning in these stories it is helpful to recall Carr's list of dispositional characteristics (2001). In the learning story above, it is easy to locate all five:

1. **Interest:** The boys are using the unit blocks to build a castle together.
2. **Involvement:** They are using words and their creative notions to communicate desires and spatial relations.
3. **Perseverance:** There are various points of struggle, both structural and communicational, through which all three boys persist.
4. **Communication:** See #2 and #3 above.
5. **Responsibility/Responsiveness:** The

children are reciprocal with the materials and help each other through their difficulties.

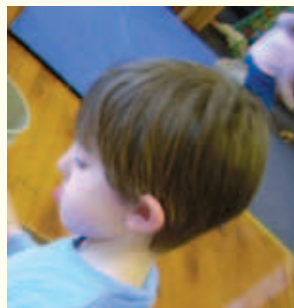
We reflect on the dispositions while putting learning into vocabulary that is meaningful to the children.

Opportunities and possibilities

The final paragraph of the learning story, before sending it off to families for response, is the teachers' thoughts explaining where we can go from here, in the immediate future in the classroom, as well as the extended future of our lives:

- What activities can we plan, what materials can we provide based on this story that will take the children to the next level?
- What future suggestions can be made for the children outside the school?

This part of the story allows us to plan curriculum that is relevant to the children. This keeps the curriculum centered on the children, inevitably holding their interest and motivation, creating possibilities for tomorrow's learning stories based on today's. With



It was at this point that Kealan came over to the area and asked, "Hey, can I help you?"

Ian replied yes, though rather quietly I suspected, because Kealan walked away. I really thought this rather curious, so I took the opportunity to clarify the situation. "Kealan?" I raised my voice a little as he was walking away. "Did you say you wanted to help over here?"

"Yes!" "I said yes." Ian knew why I called Kealan's attention back to the castles.

"Sometimes I don't understand what you say because you talk quiet," Kealan noted to Ian. By his energy and smile, I could tell Kealan was glad to be accepted. Kealan quickly got onto his knees, purveyed the terrain and available blocks, and grabbed at the quarter-circle pieces. "Let's get these over here and make the Times Circle, like the Times Square!" Kealan placed the quarter-circles arranged to be a full circle in the middle of the structure, in between the work done by Ian and Dietrich.

Dietrich, Ian, and Kealan, you are friends who enjoy collaborating with each other, sharing space and materials. Dietrich, you wanted to share time and space with whomever was interested in building the castle, and when Ian came over, you built independent structures that crept toward each other. Then Kealan came in with the energy to inject into the completion of your project.

Sometimes it can be very frustrating when we have to go back and fix our mistakes in our work. That can be quite a grown-up struggle and you both showed you can fix your mistakes by trying new ways to improve upon your original ideas, like when the blocks fell down and you repositioned them to stand up better.

When Kealan came over to help, he originally thought he was not welcome because he did not hear Ian say he could join them. I was glad to help clarify the miscommunication, because once you participated, Kealan, you got to show your idea of having *Times Circle* in the center of the structure. You must have very vivid memories of your last trip to New York City.

this reflection there is an obvious and visible flow of experience and documentation for the community to share as a whole.

Invitation to families

The circle of community of the child's experience is completed when parents, siblings, grandparents, aunts, uncles, nannies, and others share written reactions to the window we have opened for them. The expectation is that responses relate the content of the story to the relationship with the child. The story begins with the child's interest, proceeds with the teacher's descriptions and interpretations of meaning, and completes with the dilation of experience into the family and community making up the world of the whole child.

We who see the deep

Learning stories is picking up momentum in the United States as the preferred assessment model by leaders in the field of Early Childhood Education professional development for all the reasons stated in this article (Curtis & Carter, 2008). The checklist method of assessment is set up to show the link between the goals of curriculum and the children's knack for demonstrating

domain knowledge. It seems quite intuitive, really. The teachers at our center set goals according to the domains of social-emotional, social studies, math, science, physical, creative expression, language, and literacy. No one would argue the value of organizing choice-related activities and materials around these important domains. When we establish our classrooms and routines around long sessions of free play, the observer can easily move in and out of documenting and playing, offering vocabulary and meaning-making at every turn. This makes for plenty of time and opportunity for learning stories. Our job as teachers is to see, hear, and know our children to better reflect their worlds back to them, so they can see, hear, and know themselves and each other, and accomplish *their* goals. After all, is this not how we, experts in the field, define assessment?

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Play Matters is proud to be playing a part in carrying Docia Zavitkovsky's torch, honoring the tremendous value and desperate need for children to play, and making visible how truly vital their play is to their lifelong success and the health of our society.