What are Learning Stories?

Learning Stories are a widely used process orientated technique to assess children’s literacy and language learning in early childhood. Developed in New Zealand through research studies carried out by Margaret Carr, Learning Stories use storytelling to describe a child’s creative learning process (Blaiklock, 2008). Carr (1998) acknowledges that for children to do their best learning they need to be located in the activity and social practice. There are many details that are observed and recorded in a learning story, all with a particular focus on learning dispositions as participation repertoires (Hazzard, 2011). Critical incidents that highlight the learner in action are categorised into the five domains of learning dispositions that are discussed in a learning story:

- Taking an Interest
- Being Involved
- Persisting with difficulty
- Expressing and idea or feeling
- Taking responsibility

It is through the recording of details in each of these connected domains that teachers can describe episodes of achievement and gather information to assess how the child interacts verbally and non-verbally, conversation skills, personal interests and reading and writing skills (Carter, 2010). Learning stories are a way of recognising and describing the learning that is taking place through play. Smith (2003) contends that learning stories appear to hold an extraordinary power to excite and energise teachers, parents and children. Ramsey, Sturm, Breen, Lee and Carr also contend that learning stories promote communication between parents, students and teachers (2007). Smith (2003) adds that parents seem much more convinced of their child’s learning achievements when presented in a learning story (p. 12). Carter (2010) contends that learning stories have the capacity to improve learning outcomes for the child by strengthening the teacher student relationship. Carter discusses the power that learning stories have to not only evoke a love of literature within the child, but also improve the teacher’s observation, critical thinking and self-reflection skills.

Learning stories recognise that the individual, the activity and the community are all interrelated and connected in order to create one holistic learning experience (Carr, 2012). Learning stories work to establish learning dispositions that a child is ready, willing and able to participate in any given task.
Traditional Assessment and Learning Stories

Learning stories are used as a process orientated model of assessment in interpreting a child’s literacy learning that takes place during the experience. Learning stories can help to evaluate and plan for further experiences to extend upon a child’s interests and strengths. Learning stories are analysed in terms of frequency (patterns or similar episodes of achievement continue), length (stories become longer), depth (stories become more complex) and width (storied become wider as learning is applied to other areas) (Carr, 2012).

In 2001, Carr acknowledged that using a narrative approach to assessment does raise concerns about validity. She contends that conventional criteria of validity can be replaced in learning stories by judgements of accountability, incorporating aspects of plausibility and trustability of a measure.

In comparison to traditional methods of assessment, learning stories are a means to enhance learning rather than check against skills (Carr, 2001). Carr (2012) continues to reason that a narrative based approach to assessment of literacy learning will reflect learning better than performance indicators that would be seen in traditional forms of assessment. Learning stories give credit to children for their work, where traditional approaches to assessment simply fill the gaps (Gipps, 2008). Moreover, student communication skills are heightened and encouraged through learning stories, where they are usually silenced through checklists and testing in the traditional counterpart.

Personal Experiences with Learning Stories

It is abundantly clear throughout my time participating in the Tell Tales program and going through the process of writing a learning story, that the students have deeply developed their reading, writing, listening and responding skills. Learning stories enable us, as teachers, to gain an insight into interests that students have and how we can go about keeping them engaged within the classroom environment. It is through the further analysis of the learning story in the form of a short term review that teachers are able to clearly identify where a child sits in relation to the national curriculum and develop a strategy for where to go next. From learning stories, teachers discover what kind of learning is best suited to each student, be it whole class, group work or independent learning. This further allows teacher to optimise the quality of teacher they are providing and teach to the point of need.
References


