

## Learning stories

Good stories, be they direct or indirect, give us valuable insights into the sense making component of learning (Engel 2000).

To find out about children's learning we will use a new research tool called 'learning stories'. Learning stories are based on the learning narratives of Dr Margaret Carr from Waikato University in New Zealand (Carr & Podmore 2000, Carr 2000, Podmore & Carr 1999). Narrative or storied approaches in education have a rich history (see Genishi 1992, Witherell & Noddings 1991, Clandinin & Connelly 1990). Witherell & Noddings 1991 say this:

Finally stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems..... They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and to what effect. (p 280)

Learning stories capture the context of the learning environment that appears to be enabling or constraining learning. Learning stories are not the same as case studies or running records about children—they are narratives or stories and they need to be a good tale.

What is a good learning story? Think for a moment about what is a good story. Good stories usually take place over time, sometimes days or months but the time can be condensed for example in a fairy tale: 'A long time ago a child was born to a queen who sadly became very ill. On her fifth birthday ...'. Not every minute detail is recorded just the main really important events. Good stories give details about the context and background and this is to engage the reader. Good stories not only describe actions they also make feelings and interpretations visible (Hatterly & Sands 2002).

A small example of a learning story shows progress over time as well as some possible strategies for teacher support. The following example from Hatterly & Sands (2002) takes place in a childcare centre and shows the genre of a learning story so we can deconstruct the features.

The little rug is no longer necessary as Wiremu is off exploring the world. His roly-poly antics are leading him in new direction! He pulls himself into headstand positions (gymnastic potential here) then flops down and looks up with those dramatic dark eyes as if to say 'Well what do you think of that?'

And while on the move he's checking the environment out with lots of 'observational pauses'. Big world here I come!

Review of the learning

We're seeing progress here. Each day there is a little more confidence and strength in Wiremu's movements and such determination and persistence.

What next

We could position interesting objects at a little distance, however Wiremu has his own personal agenda. He's self-motivated to be 'on the move'. Give him lots of space and opportunity to use those developing muscles. He loves the verbal stimulation, so lots of talking with him- this is so very pleasurable anyway, as he gives such wonderful feedback!

When we compare the genre of a learning story with case studies or other forms of writing we find they are less clinical, less concerned with keeping interpretation out of the recording. They are more interesting and engaging than an anecdote and more lively and dynamic than objective field notes. The learning story can be used with other teachers, parents and children as a site for interesting conversations. Parents too can be involved in writing learning stories and interviews and dialogue from children can be included.

Learning stories can be quite short pieces or several episodes linked together. After writing the learning scenario the researcher comments on the child's (children's) learning and suggests plans for future work.

Are there right or wrong ways to write a learning story? Other people will read the story so I suggest we take a credit rather than a deficit approach to understanding learning. The stories will tell what children 'can do' rather than what they can't do. By describing strengths and interests teacher-researchers can look for positive ways forward.

'What is the theoretical base for learning stories?' Learning stories have a theoretical base in sociocultural theory. Socioculturally oriented writers have described learning as appropriated (taken up) in authentic cultural locations, defining these as communities of practice (Carr 2001, Lave 1991). The learning story research method considers the context, location and people involved as all play a part in learning.

'Is the methodology of learning story valid?', people may ask. Yes it is valid. The narrative approach to research is often used in feminist and indigenous research and concerns the ways people interpret and make sense of their experiences. Many feminist scholars argue that there is no such thing as a pure, value free, objective approach to observing people's behaviour. In fact 'the silencing of the personal voice' in academic writing may be criticised because it allows researchers to

pretend that they are distant and removed from the people observed. In teaching and learning this distancing is not the case and learning is not context free.

### References

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