

Writing Learning Stories

With thanks to Margaret Carr and Wendy Lee who created these gems, have the deepest ideas, [and offer here the most comprehensive place to look.](#)

A Learning Story engages listeners in an adventure of childhood—enlivened with our own humanity—while offering an opportunity to reflect upon what we can do for young children.

The storyteller shares a tale of emergence, speaking to the child, to the child's family, to guests, and to ourselves as observers and educators. A Learning Story builds upon the tradition of stories told around a campfire. There is no "right way" to tell a story, but a story of learning always begins with the learner's initiative — where the emergence begins. The child or children start on their own, without cues or direction. Stories are always about “good” things we value: nothing negative is said or implied about any child. The tale progresses through the subsequent stages of engagement (becoming involved) and intentionality (causing something) and continues forward in time — one instance one day or connected instances over several days. Generally, this is the sequence to be attentive to when capturing the stages of a story:

Initiative → Engagement → Intentionality → Representation → Benefaction → Reflection

The Deep View of Learning Stories

The New Zealand /Aotearoa Learning Story narrative assessment connects what we see and how we make meaning of this observed event in the light of the ideals of society and culture as expressed in the [goals and strands of Te Whaariki](#). I believe the congruence between assessment, shared goals and societal ideals is the best of all possible worlds.

Despite the lack of that congruence among ideals for society, goals, and assessment of learning here in the US, I wish to show here how one can write Learning Stories to attend to and convey what it means to grow and become a fully realized human being in a community of others.

When we imagine the biology inside a growing human being, we would recognize the natural flow of learning—passages, I call them—named in that sequence above. I have found that when Learning Stories attend to the *passages* we go through when we learn, they have a lasting impact on the life of children—an impact beyond anything I have ever seen in education.

You can visit [The Learning Frame](#) page to find a discussion of the passages along the journey: transformation—climbing a bit higher—becoming the best we can be.

A Learning Story Convention

A convention is a generalized framework we can refer to for guidance as we proceed, neither restrictive nor rigid.

Six Guides

A story benefits from having at least one photo of the context and child, or group if it is group learning story. Of course, when the photographs can illustrate the sequence of events, the more the story conveys to others when they read it.

1. I like to begin with my own interest in what the child has taken the initiative to do. When I talk about myself in the first person using “I...” I give a “voice” to me, the storyteller. As an observer I bring a personal perspective to the tale.

2. Then I describe what the child does and says from my perspective as someone who cares and is listening closely to discover what is happening. It is not totally objective: I am endeavoring to be present with my heart. I can only see the child from the outside. I try to pay close attention. This is the heart of the story.
3. At the end, I title a paragraph **“What it means”** and write about the significance of what I saw, but I am often weak at this part. I need help. This meaning-making is best done in a dialogue with other adults. Many perspectives can be included here. If the results of that meeting are voiced directly to the child, the child can hear educators speak educational words, even though the vocabulary may be complex. **“You...”** In the examples you can see this change in point of view from #2 in the first person voice to #3 in the second person voice. I write stories as if I were talking to an adult; I expect children to gain understanding on each retelling.
4. Next I offer an additional paragraph **“Opportunities and Possibilities”** to describe what we (adults, educators, parents, etc.) can provide next and give voice to what we think the future may hold. This gives a bit of insight for the participants in the school (parents, friends, and prospective enrollees) about how thoughtful educators think about what they do. Many people who wish the best for their children may not realize what educators do. It can be difficult for outsiders to understand how educators learn the ways to lead in an inquisitive and responsive way to benefit unique children. It is hard to see how educators constantly evolve their own understanding and devote themselves to a quest for what might be best over time. **“We...”** is the voice to this statement of reflective intent by evolving adults.
5. Finally, I offer a blank page for the family to respond with their view. Members of the family may have things to say to the child and to the educators. Some may easily offer something; others might need a prompt. I am sure you can find a way to draw them out based in your relationship. *I am wondering what would you say to your child about this. What do you see happening? What delights you?*
6. Like every good story, I make sure to have a title.

I make two copies of each story, one for the child and one for the school to be added to as they grow.

Effects of Learning Stories

I created a 10-week college course on Learning Stories that enabled me to gather information about the effects of learning stories on various audiences. This is what participants in those courses said.

Effect of Learning Stories on the Writer

- I can say things in stories that I could not say in any other way.
- I am seeing the child in my Learning Stories differently. For example, one child was, in my old view, a child with "issues." I viewed him mostly in negative terms. Now I see him as possessing strengths.
- I wrote the story, but I was the one who changed the most. The child's grandmother's addition to the story began with the words, "I don't know what to say, but here it is." She wrote a long list of strengths. Both the story and her list totally changed my view of this child and all children.
- I have noticed a change in myself. I see the uniqueness of each child. I am not "grouping" them. I am seeing how each child approaches things differently. I pay more attention now and see with a different eye.
- I found that some children are easier to write Learning Stories about than other children. I am becoming more deliberate in looking for their interests. I am attending to what they choose to do, so I can hone in on those I haven't seen yet.
- The children who are "low key" present a challenge for me to find a way to see them. I have to find the right time of day when they shine.

- I find this so organic and natural. There's so much richness in what children do, and now I have a way to pull the richness out of it in a kind of backward way.
- Learning Stories have helped me to see the learning that is happening for children who have English as a second language. I take pictures of them. Then later when I look more carefully at the pictures, many things come to mind that I hadn't seen. Because I have captured the child's interests, I have much more to communicate to the child and the family.
- Learning Stories have taught me patience. I have slowed way down, because I want so badly to be able to see and record what's going to happen. Something great might appear in the next moment.
- I learned that I am more aware of the process children is going through, and I am capable of allowing children to complete their learning experiences in their own way. It is just after observation and patience that I am able to witness it.
- Because I was focused on taking pictures for a Learning Story, I did not step in right away where I might have before.
- Learning Stories have changed the way I look at teaching. It's no longer about what I view is important for the children to learn. Now I am the one being taught what is interesting and what there is to be learned from it.

Effect of Learning Stories on the Families

- I had a parent conference after the story of their child. A much deeper disclosure happened, not about the story but about the issues they faced at home. This had the effect of opening a non-threatening invitation to share new things about their family with me.
- My story was given to the family in Chinese. The family read it over and over again. The grandfather, who speaks no English and I had no way to communicate with, was in tears when he read it.
- The family read the story to all the extended families. They all valued the fact that this child is unique.
- The parents made a copy and sent it to Grandma.
- I have more open communication with the parents now. They are happier with the school. The other day I asked the mom of the Learning Story child if I could have five minutes to talk to her. I was surprised by how enthusiastically she said, "Yes!"
- I see parents more aware of what we teachers do at school. They value us more. They recognize the importance of having skills as a teacher.
- Our families are more connected to us now
- It's hard to prepare parents for their additions to the story, which is to write a positive, heart-felt personal response to the story. This is something entirely new to them.
- It was a huge anxiety for some families to put something on paper. They need some examples.

Effect of Learning Stories on the Child in the Story

- Now my child wants to show me his latest work and asks to have his picture taken.
- A child's self-esteem was transformed dramatically from being mostly silent to being in the forefront. She even yelled across the room to greet teachers as they came in.
- It's amazingly important to them. It's personalized. It's permanent.
- My child is one of those quiet ones that are hard to read. After she read her Learning Story she began to be more expressive in school. Her father said that he took her to the community center on Saturday. As they passed through the gym she saw children her age playing basketball. She asked her father to enroll her in basketball, too. She is taking charge of her life.

Effect of Learning Stories on the Other Teachers

- After listening to another teacher's Learning Story, I see that child differently. This child is in another classroom. When I saw him next I took the time to talk to him. My relationship changed.
- Hearing a story has made me think before saying things like, "Let's not do..." I am more open to trying to understand the child's process.
- The other teacher is noticing the child more.

Effect of Learning Stories on the Other Children

- A child said to me, "Teacher, I want a story like that."
- I see all the children more focused and intense now.
- The children loved hearing the story. I was shocked how they were so into it. I would love to get this into a form, so I could do it for everyone.
- The story I wrote was about how two 10-month-olds were so happy to see each other and handed each other toys. It seems that since I read the story to these very young children that more connections are forming between the other children as well.

Comparison of Learning Stories to Checklist Assessment

- If I had the chance, I would do Learning Stories all day long. I enjoy doing the observations and discussing them with the team. I value the checklist observations, too, but this is more meaningful to me, the child, and the families.
- Doing these makes myself pay attention, and when I do, I discover that I value what they are doing. Checklist observation requires me to look for listed things, which is different.
- Learning Stories goes so much deeper than just assessment.
- When I take a picture I am able to recall the situation so much more clearly than with an anecdotal record or a checkmark. I can see in the picture the context and body language, so the whole experience comes back to me.
- Unfortunately, doing Learning Stories comes out of unpaid time. It does take time.
- It's an amazing process! I wish I could do it in place of other paperwork.
- Now I feel I am not forced. I am not pushed to look for what others have decided are the categories and objectives. Yet, once I look and create a Learning Story, I can see all the objectives, and I can see the ways to create emergent curriculum in the result.
- It has changed how I observe. Instead of my focus centered on looking for children to do the listed item, I am being open and waiting for something amazing and new to emerge.

Agreements

I use my smart phone to videotape. I think the taping of children and educators is an essential component of a good school. School is for learning, experimenting, trying new things, making mistakes, and correcting mistakes. Recording is the most informative form of documentation, because different viewers can generate different views in a cooperative discussion. One can play a video over and over again. I never see what is truly happening on the first view.

Recordings can be treated as privileged communication. A privileged communication is private and must be kept in confidence by the recipient for the benefit of the clients: child, the family, and the school. Families can provide permission formally for this to happen and staff can sign a non-disclosure agreement covering disposition of the recordings. There must be a way to find agreement so recordings can inform practice. If the

final story is to be shared beyond the community, formal written permission can be included in that agreement.

Technology

I use software to watch and listen to the recording several times to find the essential story ([The Learning Frame](#)). I use video editing software that makes it easy to use arrow keys to select exactly the video frame that is most elegant. I export each still frame to a named file for the story; each frame gets numbered in sequence. Those images then can be selected and dragged into a new slide show in Keynote. I like it because each image automatically creates its own slide. The mask function enables me to crop closely. I type the story slide by slide. All slide show software offers choices in the printing dialog to select the number of slides to print per page and to create a PDF that is easy to share.

Aspirational Challenges

There's no right way here. We are each on our own path, hopefully in concert with others who are working on being better, too. For me, right has two parts: One, I see the children happy, participatory, involved, and vigorous; they are being and acting in ways I value and I seek. Two, I am being more like my true self, not trying to copy anyone or do some procedure: I am authentic, open, aware, and fully present. When both conditions occur at the same time, I know I am doing the best I can right now. I realize, however, there is more to seek, for tomorrow or the next group of children will not be the same. If there is any right way at all, it can only be thought of as a quest, a continuing journey toward beauty, or goodness, or something like that. In that spirit, I offer three signposts to attend to in writing these stories. They are alerts, if you will, along the path.

Alert: judgments

What gives us the right to judge others, their actions, or their works? Praise is judgment, an opinion: that's good, beautiful, nice, wonderful, etc. When one praises, it implies that I have some kind of higher status. I have importance. I carry the expectation to sprinkle stars on those below who will benefit from my favor.

The act of praise is also not authentic; it's not talking straight. A child's work is not really beautiful. It's not really a good job; there isn't a job. We can be supportive of children by talking about an accomplishment, a creative act, or a surprise. That expresses what we see and value, but if we offer our unsolicited opinions, we cross a line into being unreal. "*I like how you thought of watering the plants by yourself.*" OK, that may be what you are thinking, but if you say it, the judgmental form restricts a child's freedom to be.

Then, too, praise has a dampening effect on those who are not praised, for the implication is present to do what the praised person is doing. Do we really want children to seek our approval rather than develop self-confidence and self-awareness? **This aspiration is to see and honor this evolving human being, not to slip into easy habits of judging.**

Alert: assumptions about the inner life of others

What gives us the right to describe how others are thinking or feeling? We may have inferences, and razor-sharp insights into others, but in stating how others feel we cross a line. We have no way to be sure, so it's odd to pretend we do. Usually what happens in the inner life of others is not even available to the child: they are conveying what they think and feel in what they do, what one can see and hear. If a child hears someone say, with confidence, what they think the child thinks or feels, (*you worked hard, JR was eager, Josie was determined*) it oversimplifies and may alter the meaning of the story; at least, it could be confusing to the child.

We always can talk about ourselves, because we have access to that. Our emotions and feelings give life to the story we tell. We don't know, really, how others feel. **This aspiration is to be present to your own experience, listen deeply with love and compassion, and let children discover themselves in an atmosphere of confidence and trust.**

Alert: stories created in order to complete developmental items on an external form

Why should we allow external systems to interfere? They don't even know the child(ren) we are writing about! We ought to be free to write learning stories about what we observe at this moment with this child or these children. Yes, Learning Stories are an assessment in narrative form, but we can be distracted from the deeper discoveries right here if we are doing our duty filling a development chart. The best of the best Learning Stories arise in unexpected ways when we love being with children.

This is said more succinctly by the teacher writing the last bulleted item you saw above:

- *It has changed how I observe. Instead of my focus centered on looking for children to do the listed item, I am being open and waiting for something amazing and new to emerge.*

So many forces draw us away from stopping the train, setting down our baggage, and spending the day in deep attentiveness to children. **This aspiration is to be alive, here and now, present—to discover and to honor this amazing child.**

For more thoughts...

[So What is Different About Learning Stories?](#)

[Tom Drummond on the Power of Story Telling in Early Education](#)

[Using 'Learning Stories' to Strengthen Teachers Relations with Children](#)