

Learning notes: An alternative to learning stories



ECE resources

Some teachers seek a wider range of assessment tools and strategies to use alongside learning stories. The concept of learning notes, developed by Ken Blaiklock, provides a strategy for assessment that is both comprehensive and time-practical. Learning notes can be produced more frequently than learning stories, and help teachers to carry out a range of assessment across *Te Whāriki's* strands and learning outcomes.

Unlike learning stories, learning notes do not follow a narrative format. This means they are less time-consuming and can be completed more frequently for children, quickly building up a picture of the child as a learner. They can be used to provide an accurate, concise description of an event, a comment interpreting the learning, and next steps. These three components can be summarised as **describe**, **interpret** and **what next?**

- **Describe** involves writing a description of a child's involvement in a learning experience in a few sentences. Information about the context, time, other participants and language expressed can be included. This part of the learning note is written at the time of observation or shortly afterwards, perhaps in a notebook to be written up later or on a post-it which is transferred to the child's portfolio. Blaiklock suggests sometimes only the 'describe' section of a learning note is needed, particularly where accomplishments are obvious, although ERO is very critical of assessment practices that do not highlight learning.
- **Interpret** is a comment that highlights the significance of the learning.
- The **what next?** section records ideas for extending and following on from what was observed.

The strengths of learning notes

Learning notes often several benefits including:

- **Ease of use:** the thinking behind learning notes is one that teachers naturally follow when working with and observing children, often in an informal way.
- **Speed:** learning notes provide a more immediate form of assessment because the note form makes them relatively quick to produce. This means that the assessment is recorded relatively soon after the event so that plans for following up the learning event can be quickly implemented. Teachers may be able to complete several learning notes for each child per week.
- **Enabling additional interpretations:** because initial observations are (ideally) written without interpretation, they can be shared with families and colleagues to gain further interpretations. It can be harder to facilitate this when the teacher's interpretation is interwoven into the account of an event, as with a narrative form of assessment. However, more detail in the 'describe' section will be required to gain rich and varied interpretations from non-observers.

Further reading

Blaiklock, K. (2010). Assessment in New Zealand early childhood settings: A proposal to change from Learning Stories to Learning Notes. *Early Education*, 48(2), 5-10.

Zhang, Q. (2015). Advocating for a comprehensive approach to assessment in New Zealand early childhood education. *New Zealand Research in Early Childhood Education Journal*, 18, 67-79.

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