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Course Number: White

Instructor authorizing: ECS 463

Extracted from (source citation): Carr, Margaret. *Assessment in Early Childhood Settings: Learning Stories*. London: P. Chapman Pub. ., 2001. Print.

Source owned by: Professor

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Learning Stories

Assessing Learning Dispositions

The previous three chapters provided examples of domains of learning disposition, and focused on the children and their learning. Those chapters also developed some guidelines for the assessment of that learning. This chapter turns more directly to the process of assessment, and the focus of the book now shifts from the child as a learner, to the teacher as an assessor. They are, of course, closely connected, and the frame of reference is still one of a 'disposed' learner in a dispositional milieu, but the major players are now, primarily, the adults. I set out the guidelines for assessment that have been developed so far, add two more, and then outline an assessment procedure that a group of practitioners have been putting into practice: Learning Stories.

The following were the guidelines for assessment that emerged from examples of children taking an interest and being involved, persisting with difficulty and uncertainty, communicating with others and taking responsibility. They are guidelines for the assessment of participation repertoires that are an accumulation of skills + knowledge + intent + social partners and practices + tools + motivation.

- *Assessment will acknowledge the unpredictability of development*

Assessment that recognises the unpredictability of development will not insist on a 'staircase' model in which one step follows from another in orderly fashion. To use a botanical metaphor, development and learning is like a network of underground stems or rhizomes, every now and then revealing a flower (lily of the valley, or flag iris) on the surface (Patti Lather, 1993, has written, for instance, about 'rhizomatic' validity). Case studies, over time, will be appropriate.

- *Assessment will seek the perspective of the learner*

Seeking the perspective of the learner is neither easy nor always possible, but if the 'underground' and motivational nature of

learning is to be accessed in some way, then children will need to have a say. In the assessment of writing in a first grade classroom in California, described by Sarah Merritt and Ann Haas Dyson (1992), the children's journals reflected their friendships as well as their developing encoding skills and the increasing complexity of their communication.

- *A narrative approach will reflect the learning better than performance indicators*

The observations in the previous three chapters were set out as stories, often a series of stories over time. Stories include the surround, and stories over time provide data for interpretation. Jerome Bruner (1996, p. 94) wrote that narrative is a mode of thought *and* a vehicle of meaning-making. By using a narrative approach, a learning disposition will be protected from too much fragmentation, although skills and knowledge may well be foregrounded at times.

- *Collaborative interpretations of collected observations will be helpful*

Assessment will draw on exemplars rather than performance indicators, and teachers will determine constructs ('Is this an example of tackling difficulty for Alan?') and participation patterns by agreement. In Chapter 3, agreement trials for exemplars of complex understandings in school curriculum assessments provided an example.

- *Many tasks will provide their own assessment*

For most of the time, the adult will not be the assessor: the artefacts, activities and the social community itself will provide for the learner their own indicators of achievement or success; the learner will judge for him- or herself how things are going. Those artefacts, activities and membership rites in which the goals are clear to, or constructed by, the child will provide their own intrinsic rewards. They include jigsaws, writing a name, building a building, being included in the play.

- *Assessment will itself contribute to the children's dispositions*

Dispositions are combinations of being ready, being willing and being able that emerge from learning experiences which occur often and which are supported, recognised and highlighted. Credit models of assessment will be foregrounded, and a deficit focus on the skills and knowledge that the learner might 'need' will be occasional. Although the assessment will be specific and local, we will nevertheless look towards robust dispositions that will provide a participation repertoire for learning in other places. In the portfolios prepared for children and families at the Pen Green Early Childhood Centre in the UK positive achievements are recorded and celebrated.

- *Assessment will protect and enhance the early childhood setting as a learning community*

Assessment will protect and enhance the centre as a learning community in whatever way the community defines learning and provides for it. Assessment will be about participation: it will be of the learner-in-action-with-mediational-means in terms of mediational means that are locally available. The documentation in Reggio Emilia programmes provides an example in which the evaluation of the progress of projects and the evaluation of the progress of the children's participation in those projects is the same process.

Many of the examples for these guidelines come from special programmes in which practitioners are given a great deal of time for documentation, or from research in which the observer is a researcher with no other responsibilities in the centre. These examples are instructive because they illustrate important guidelines and principles, but they will almost always need to be adapted for real early childhood education settings. This reality check on assessment acknowledges the perspective of the assessing adult. Two more guidelines are important here:

- *Assessment processes will be possible for busy practitioners*

I remember some years ago beginning a workshop on assessment in early childhood for about fifty practitioners by explaining that academics always like to teach new and unfamiliar words. 'Here is one that I would like you to become familiar with,' I said, and I wrote the word 'lunch-hour' on the whiteboard. The idea was greeted with laughter and a buzz of mutually sympathetic talk. One of the difficulties with interpretive methods of assessment is that they appear to involve the writing of lengthy observations which take up time that early childhood staff feel would be better spent working with the children (or having lunch). This perception means that in the eyes of the early childhood practitioner, the time spent on assessment is not time well spent – and in many cases this may well be so. Management and external agencies frequently make heavy demands on practitioners for documentation. One option is to minimise the time this takes by using numerical scales and checklists. However, if assessment is to assist the children with their learning, the other guidelines have indicated that this option is a problem. A balance needs to be struck where the time and effort required by more elaborated processes is manageable and practicable and the assessments are interesting and enjoyable.

● *The assessment will be useful to practitioners*

To use another botanical metaphor and quote Gray's elegy in an unusual context: many an assessment is 'born to blush unseen and waste its sweetness on the desert air'. Unanalysed and unused observations and running records lie unseen in countless portfolios, record books and cupboards. We want assessments that will be *formative*: they will inform and form the ongoing teaching and learning process, and be useful to practitioners.

Learning Stories

In the last three chapters, when I wanted to illustrate the domains of learning disposition in action, I called on *stories* about a number of children. The stories included the context, they often included the relationship with adults and peers, they highlighted the activity or task at hand, and they included an interpretation from a story-teller who knew the child well and focused on evidence of new or sustained interest, involvement, challenge, communication and responsibility. In some cases the evidence could be listed: the examples of taking responsibility in an episode of joint attention, for instance, had many common features of bridging and structuring. In some cases the interpretation was much more to do with knowing the child very well, and of acknowledging the 'underground' and unknowable nature of the development: Sally coping with grief was an example. Many of these stories were part of a sequence over time, and in many of them a number of story-tellers had collaborated with the author in the interpretation (Moses' parents, the staff in Rosie's childcare centre and Alan's teachers, for example). Stories can capture the complexity of situated learning strategies plus motivation. The research on children's relationships by Judy Dunn (1993) highlights the way in which stories integrate the social with the cognitive and the affective. And stories can incorporate the child's voice, as the work of Sue Lyle (2000) has illustrated. They emphasise participation and culture, and their use as a framework for understanding learning owes much to the discussions of narrative in the work of Jerome Bruner. Mary Beattie quotes the poem 'Among School Children' by W. B. Yeats (from a 1958 collection, p. 242) to highlight the connectedness of a story approach:

O chestnut-tree, great-rooted blossomer,
Are you the leaf, the blossom or the bole?
O body swayed to music, O brightening glance,
How can we know the dancer from the dance?

What are learning stories?

The capacities of stories to highlight the outcomes that we were interested in led me and a number of early childhood practitioners to trial, develop and adapt an alternative method of assessment. We call it the Learning Story approach. Learning Stories are similar to the narrative-style observations set out in the previous three chapters, but they are much more structured. They are observations in everyday settings, designed to provide a cumulative series of qualitative 'snapshots' or written vignettes of individual children displaying one or more of the five target domains of learning disposition. The five domains of disposition are translated into actions: taking an interest, being involved, persisting with difficulty or uncertainty, expressing an idea or a feeling, and taking responsibility or taking another point of view. This framework developed over several years from 1995 as part of the research project 'Assessing Children's Experiences in Early Childhood'. Staff in each of the five different settings debated the criteria for each of these actions in relation to individual children and to their programme. Practitioners collected 'critical incidents' (Gettinger and Stoiber, 1998) that highlighted one or more of these actions. A series of Learning Stories over time, for a particular child, were collected together and scanned for narrative pattern. Children's stories were kept in a folder or a portfolio, and they often included photographs, photocopies of children's work, and children's comments.

The following is an example of a Learning Story for Sean, who is four years old. He attended the same kindergarten as Alan (who appeared in Chapter 3) and was part of the gate project. His portfolio included a polaroid photo of him using the carpentry drill. Attached to the photo is the following short Learning Story, written by Annette, one of the teachers. It describes a situation in which Sean perseveres with a difficult task, even when it gets 'stuck'. Comment included:

'The bit's too small Annette, get a bigger one.' We do, drill a hole and then use a drill to put in the screw. 'What screwdriver do we need?' 'The flat one.' Sean chooses the correct one and tries to use it. 'It's stuck.' He kept trying even when it was difficult.

There is just enough detail in the text and the photograph for this to provide a discussion point for Sean and the teacher next day. The story is filed with others that tell of similar occasions when Sean has completed a difficult task of his own choosing. In most centres, there is a specially devised Learning Story form for this purpose. The teachers regularly review the stories, and plan for progress in a number of

ways. In Sean's kindergarten, for instance, examples of persisting with difficulty included: following a plan (and adapting the plan), persevering with (choosing, persisting with, and perhaps completing) a difficult or complex task, acknowledging an error or problem (and planning to solve it, or actually solving it).

Many of the Learning Stories began with a primary focus on one domain of learning disposition, such as persisting with difficulty for Sean. However, two processes integrate the five domains of learning disposition: overlapping and sequencing. *Overlapping* is the process in which related domains work together. Interest and involvement frequently occur at the same time (although one can have an interest without the involvement), and creative problem-solving is frequently (but not always) a common factor in both involvement and the tackling of difficulty. Children who have the motivation to tackle and persist with difficulty often express their ideas or feelings in the process. Episodes of joint attention include expressing one's ideas or feelings and taking the point of view of others (taking responsibility). Emily's capacity for taking on the viewpoint of others may have been associated with her concern for being seen to be right and her anxiety about making a mistake: a negative correlation between taking on another point of view and persisting with difficulty. Research (Yair, 2000, p. 205) has shown that choice and agency (having responsibility) raises students' interest and sense of accomplishment. *Sequencing* views this integration of domains of learning disposition as a sequence of actions. Danny's persistence with challenge followed from his interest and involvement. Rosie's negotiations in sociodramatic play were an accumulation of interest, involvement, perseverance, expressing her ideas and taking on the viewpoints of others. The sequence of actions is set out in Figure 6.1.

Shifting from Deficit to Credit: An Example of Learning Stories in Action

Bruce is a four-year-old at the childcare centre. Before the centre introduced the Learning Story approach to assessment, they were using a checklist where skills were ticked or crossed and dated, and the items with a cross alongside were discussed. Intervention was planned as part of a skills- and deficit-based assessment system. Bruce's schedule always had crosses alongside the social skills. He was frequently aggressive, the other children were afraid of him, and he was often unhappy. The staff were also using a behavioural programme that

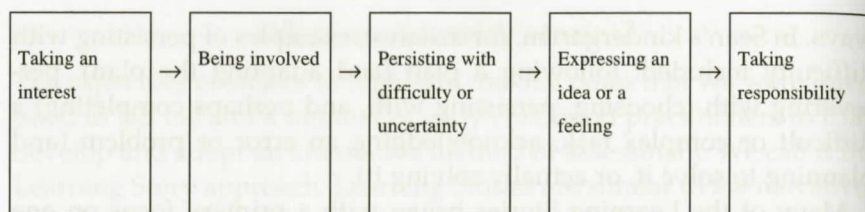


Figure 6.1 A Learning Story sequence

assessed the surround to the aggressive and angry behaviour: they looked for the antecedents and the payoff (the consequences). Practitioners know just how a Bruce in their programme can dominate the attention of the adults and the children. Staff now began to use the categories in the Learning Story framework to document those occasions when Bruce was interested and involved, when he persevered with difficulty, expressed his point of view in acceptable ways and took on responsibility. They still had to handle the aggression, but the following stories began to appear. The Learning Stories document and encourage Bruce's emerging readiness, willingness and ability to communicate with others in acceptable ways and to take responsibility in negotiations and relationships.

Learning Story 1

Louise and Bruce have laid out mattresses on the hill in the sun, and have had discussions about which one they will each lie on.

Bruce to Louise: I'll be the Dad.

Louise: No, Jeanie's the Dad.

Bruce approaches Jeanie, with his face close to hers.

Jeanie: I'm the Daddy.

Bruce: There can be two Daddies.

Jeanie: No.

Bruce: I'll be the mate eh?

This appears to be acceptable to Jeanie and Louise (they don't say 'No'), and they play together amicably for some time.

Apart from the fact that Louise and Jeanie have now learned to say 'No' to Bruce, this Story highlights Bruce's capacity for negotiation ('There can be two Daddies' and 'I'll be the mate eh?'). At first this is confined to stories about sociodramatic play that include Louise, but the staff are optimistic that this capacity will develop in other settings. Previously he has normally expressed his point of view by pushing and punching.

Learning Story 2

Bruce believes (perhaps accurately) that Amy has scratched him: he tells her he doesn't like it, chases her, and explains to Milly (a teacher)

that he didn't hit her (Amy). [Both Milly and another teacher gave positive feedback.]

This was one of the first times that Bruce appeared to be deliberately taking control of his own behaviour: taking on the kind of responsibility expected of him here. Teacher feedback included a comment on their recognition of this.

Learning Story 3

Bruce asks Annie to look after his block and animal construction, and she attempts to do so. At one stage he says: 'Annie, it's okay, it looked after itself!'

Bruce is beginning to call out or goes to an adult to demand attention instead of creating an unacceptable incident.

Learning Story 4

This morning Bruce announces: 'I'm a good pirate.' 'And I save people.'

Although the adults were still spending a lot of time protecting other children from disruption and disturbance, and paying attention to Bruce, they now notice the stories in which he communicates with others in acceptable ways and takes responsibility for his actions. They discuss these at staff meetings and plan to try to maximise these occasions by encouraging play with Louise (monitoring her comfort with this, and adding extra players where possible), and by continuing to help him to reframe his pirate stories (saving people and finding treasure, rather than killing and taking hostages at the point of a sword). On especially flexible days, adults are on hand to give him a cuddle when he retreats into baby-like behaviour. They also remind him that indeed he is big: he shows Vera (one of the teachers) his sand construction: Hey Kimi made a little one and I made a big one. [Vera: well, she's little and you're big.]

Adults explain clearly why they cannot always guard his constructions, incorporating their respect for him with their responsibility to be with other children: i.e. this is a place where everyone takes responsibility for everyone else. Interestingly, other children share some of the responsibility for Bruce's curriculum. Rosie tells me (a visitor) to 'Say don't do that Bruce. I don't like it' when Bruce hits me on the cheek with a piece of jigsaw. Andy takes on the role of encouraging Bruce's sociable behaviour. Andy to adult, with Bruce listening: 'Lucky (that) Bruce shifted the truck (to let me make the road).' Adult: 'Yes, lucky that Bruce shifted the truck.' (Mind you, later when Bruce jumps on Gina and makes her cry, Andy says 'That was funny, Bruce.') Later Andy moves little Paul away from Bruce's vigorous sand throwing: 'Look out Paulie in case you get sand in your eyes.'

At a staff meeting the comment is made that Bruce's stories and explorations appear to reflect his interests in being powerful and being noticed. They are often to do with territory. He claims the climber as 'his' horse, and the area of the sand pit as 'his', where only a few can go (even when he's not there). Pirates is a popular script, for obvious reasons. And he is often keen to join sociodramatic play as the Dad, although other children are wary of this unless an adult is also part of the play and can protect them. Stories in which an adult takes a secondary role to Bruce are also enjoyable, in particular because they keep an adult in tow and listening, but *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* is also a particular favourite, for unknown reasons. A long spell of enjoyable play occurred when he built an enclosure around an adult and some children in the family corner: it began with Bruce as a tiger, and later developed as Bruce protecting and enclosing the tigers (the tigers were involved in kitchen play, but fortunately this did not concern the director). Earlier in the day he had built an enclosure around toy wild animals in the block corner.

Learning Story 5

Bruce in the block corner.

He builds an enclosure around the wild animals.

Very involved.

Learning Story 6

In the family corner, Bruce starts off being a tiger. I (teacher) suggest that I am a tiger as well, and I encourage him to make a larger enclosure around us all (I noticed that he had made an enclosure around wild animals this morning). Other children are playing a domestic kitchen 'making breakfast' game, and take no notice of Bruce. He makes an enclosure around us all.

Adults help him to elaborate these stories, negotiate peaceably, and take responsibility for the safety of others. They facilitate and document positive stories, and re-tell them to each other, to Bruce, and to his family.

The Four Ds of Learning Stories

Bruce was making a number of implicit judgements about whether and how to participate in this learning environment. There were a number of activities (enclosing animals and people and building safe areas) and social communities (with Louise, and with the adults) that were of interest to him, as well as the traditional stories that he

enjoyed playing out for reasons we could only guess at. He appeared to be coming to view the environment as safe enough to get involved in and to talk about his feelings. He was starting to see that he could take responsibility in group settings in the childcare centre in acceptable and satisfying ways. The Learning Stories were focusing the staff's attention, providing a basis for teaching, contributing to Bruce's learning and highlighting these actions for Bruce and his family. In doing that assessment, the staff were interpreting the learning in four ways. They were *describing* Bruce's interest, involvement, challenge, communication and responsibility in terms of the local opportunities to learn as well as in terms specific to Bruce. They were *documenting* some of his actions, but not all, and during *discussions* at staff meetings they were reminding each other of other relevant – congruent and alternative – stories. The Learning Stories were providing guidance for their interactions: they were both formally and informally *deciding* what to do next. These are judgements by the adults (although the children will be included in as many of them as possible). I have called these the 'four Ds' of assessment: Describing, Documenting, Discussing and Deciding.

Describing and deciding

Learning Stories have been sufficiently wide-ranging in their focus to acknowledge the unpredictability of development and to both map *and* enhance participation repertoires. Chapters 7 and 10 provide details of the practitioners using Learning Stories to describe the learning, and to decide what to do next (plan for further learning). They illustrate ways in which Learning Stories can:

- acknowledge the unpredictability of development;
- contribute to the children's learning dispositions;
- protect and enhance the early childhood setting as a learning community;
- reflect the learning better than performance indicators.

Learning Stories are a pedagogical tool for: the transformation of participation (encouraging further and deeper learning), the prevention of the narrowing of learning, the transmission of the classroom culture to the participants, and the reframing of incoming narratives.

The transformation of participation

Transformation of participation, or development, can be encouraged in four ways through the writing of Learning Stories (Chapter 10

provides examples of practitioners planning for this development). The four ways involve analysing for: frequency, length, depth and width. Firstly, *similar episodes become more frequent*; they have a pattern to them. Occasional actions are becoming inclinations. Secondly, *stories get longer* in the sense that the episode covers more of the actions outlined in Figure 6.1. When Jason, whose actions have been characterised by involvement and perseverance, begins to teach others then the sequence of the stories is extended. Thirdly, *stories get deeper*. The learning appears more complex. In the case of Sean's centre, for many of the children, persisting with difficulty extended from making a plan to following and adapting increasingly complex plans. Fourthly, *stories get wider*. Nell, who has been so adept at tackling difficulty in social domains and in avoiding them when technology was involved, begins to tackle difficulty in constructing a box for marble painting. With implicit reference to learning as *participation*, Caroline Gipps (1999) has indicated that within the framework of socio-cultural theory, 'rather than an external and formalised activity, assessment is integral to the teaching process, and embedded in the social and cultural life of the classroom' (p. 378). She refers to the work of Vygotsky to suggest that it is consistent with his notion of the zone of proximal development for assessment to be of *best* performance: assisted by other people and tools. She outlined three kinds of assessment procedure that can embed assessment in the social and cultural life of the classroom. The first is to use portfolios that reflect the process of learning over time, in a range of well-documented actions and activities. The second is to assess students in collaborative group enterprises, observing the relationships and interactions and perhaps devising ways in which the students have to take responsibility to develop ideas and solutions to problems collaboratively. The third is to include the learners' views on their learning and to give them a role in negotiating assessment and in self-assessment. Gipps added that 'much of the work in this field is still at the level of research'. Learning Stories are nudging that work out of the research field and into the field of everyday practice; in turn we need to make sure that research continues to explore the connections with assessment goals and guidelines. Much of this research will now be, and is being, carried out by the teachers themselves.

The prevention of narrowing of learning

If we find the case a compelling one for 'broadening the basis of assessment to prevent the narrowing of learning' (as Mary James and

Caroline Gipps (1998) argue, referring to higher-order skills and 'deep learning'), then we should explore more complex ways to do assessment. Learning Stories is one of these ways. I commented in Chapter 1 that assessment procedures in early childhood will call on interpretive and qualitative approaches for the same reasons as a researcher will choose interpretive and qualitative methods for researching complex learning in a real-life early childhood setting: an interest in the wider frame of the learner-in-action or -in-relationship, and an interest in an accumulation of outcome that includes motivation.

Transmission of the classroom culture to the participants

Learning Stories document the learning culture in this place: this is what we do here, this is what we value here. Narrative in education usually refers to teachers' stories and stories about teachers (see, for instance, the work of Jean Clandinin and Michael Connelly, Mary Beattie, and the teachers' stories told by Sue Middleton and Helen May). They reflect an interest in the classroom or the early childhood centre as culture and community. Sigrun Gudmundsdottir (1991) writes about narrative structures in curriculum and describes narratives as 'vehicles for teaching' (p. 212). Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger (1991) include examples of the role of story-telling in the transmission of a community of practice: Yucatec Mayan girls in Mexico who will eventually become midwives will hear stories of 'difficult cases, of miraculous outcomes, and the like' (p. 68).

Reframing incoming narratives

Learning Stories can reframe pessimistic narratives that take a deficit approach, as the example of Bruce illustrated. The use of the term *narrative* to describe recursive cycles has become part of the counselling literature (Monk, Winslade, Crocket and Epston, 1997). In a 'narrative therapy' approach to counselling, the counsellor is not the expert, fixing up the problem. Instead, the therapist and client together 'story' the client's experience. Because this is a therapy context, the narrative usually begins as a constraint and the client wants to change it. The therapist and the client search for glimmers of an alternative narrative, for what they call 'sparkling moments'. A narrative about helplessness and despair becomes a narrative about competence and optimism. Problems are interpreted as social constructions that can be changed. These optimistic stories have often not had an audience before, and the influence of a valued audience is a key element in the reconstruction of life stories.

Discussing and documenting

Learning Stories have been transparent and accessible to four audiences: the staff, the children, the families and external reviewers. Chapters 8 and 9 provide details of the practitioners using Learning Stories to share the assessment by discussing and documenting it in a range of ways. They illustrate ways in which Learning Stories can:

- seek the perspective of the learner;
- include collaborative interpretations of collected observations;
- allow tasks to provide their own assessment.

One example of the impact of discussing learning with children has already been cited in Chapter 2. In Harry Torrance and John Pryor's (1998) account of a teacher's base-line assessment discussion with four-year-old Eloise on the day after she joined the reception class, Eloise was picking up some clear messages about the power structure in the classroom and the learning that was valued there. Rhona Weinstein (1989) has argued that children are well-tuned to pick up these messages – verbal and non-verbal – about adult expectations, and that the expectations of teachers are a critical variable in the development of children's expectations for their own learning (Chapter 9 discusses teacher expectation effects in greater detail). Torrance and Prior also commented (p. 81), with reference to the teacher's assessment of Eloise's progress some months later, that the nature of those early interactions can frame up continuing and future interactions as well. The interaction with Eloise was an example of *power on* (introduced in Chapter 2). Some months later the teacher was still primarily interested in Eloise's ability to conform, and not in her academic progress. The three guidelines that introduce this section are about power sharing. Learning Stories have illustrated a way in which assessment can be part of a *power for* and *power with* framework of learning and teaching, seeking the perspective of the learner, including other interpreters, and mirroring a dispositional milieu in which the artefacts, activities and social communities provide their own reward. They are designed to be part of dispositional milieux in which learners take responsibility.

Concluding Comment

This chapter has picked up the theoretical analysis of learning from the earlier chapters and has begun to answer the question about

assessment practice in Chapter 1: How can we assess early childhood outcomes in ways that promote and protect learning? Chapters 3, 4 and 5 had proposed seven guidelines for assessment which supported the development of complex learning outcomes. Two further guidelines have been added to acknowledge the voice of practitioners: assessment should be possible and useful. All these guidelines will weave their way through the next chapters. This chapter called on these guidelines to argue for an assessment framework called Learning Stories. The next four chapters are about practice. They provide an account of how the Learning Story framework has been implemented in a number of different settings and they discuss the changes that have been made to adapt it to local opportunities and learning places. The four Ds of assessment procedure form the topics for the next chapters: Describing, Discussing, Documenting and Deciding.