



Since the introduction of the National Quality Standard (NQS); the Early Years Learning Framework (EYLF); and My Time, Our Place (MTOPI), the subject of Learning Stories has been frequently raised. It seems many educators are still unsure about what a Learning Story is, how to write one, when to write one, how many to write, who should be given a copy, and then what to do with them.

Before giving any answers, we need to dispel the myth that the NQS requires educators to write Learning Stories. Far from it, the NQS does not tell us how to document children's learning or the methods we are to use.

So why use Learning Stories?

The NQS requires documentation of the program to:

- illustrate how parents' and children's ideas and points of view are valued, respected and included
- mean something to children, and the children can share and enjoy them with other family members
- provide parents with a true insight into their children's day at the service, and the learning that occurs
- make it easy for parents to contribute to their child's program
- increase children's understanding of their learning, including how they learn
- detail how educators respond to children's ideas and play, and how they extend children's learning, and
- promote children's agency.

(NQS 1.1.1, 1.1.2, 1.1.3, 1.1.4, 1.1.5, 1.1.6, 1.2.1, 1.2.2, 1.2.3)

Learning Stories meet many of these NQS requirements in a way that traditional documentation – with its emphasis on objectivity and almost exclusive use by the educator (eg not shared with the child and rarely with parents) – does not. However, Learning Stories is just one of the methods, albeit a highly effective one, of documenting children's learning. Educators also need to continue to use other methods such as anecdotal records, jottings, captioned photographs, work samples and checklists.

What is a Learning Story?

A Learning Story is just that – a story about the learning that takes place in child-initiated play. It is hopefully a good read. It is written for the child/ren, the family, interested others and, of course, the educator. Learning Stories are always positive, and always about the good things.

A Learning Story includes any information which influences a child's learning, such as background, context, interactions, their decisions and actions, and consequences. It focuses more on their disposition (eg confidence, curiosity, persistence, concentration, independence, cooperation) than on knowledge and skills. Rather than being the objective outsider, the educator (author) can draw upon personal understanding, professional expertise, insights, thoughts and feelings; no need to write objectively. After all, you are a very much an insider, so write from the heart.

A Learning Story is also used to assess children's learning, and to plan for further experiences to extend upon their interests and strengths.

How to write a Learning Story

Perhaps the best way to learn how to write a Learning Story is to look at some well-written examples, such as Josie's Drip and Henry's Bus, which can be found at <http://tomdrummond.com/learning-story-examples/>.

You will see that they have the following elements:

- title
- photo(s)
- text
- section on 'What it means'
- section on 'Opportunities and Possibilities'
- space for parents to comment (Parents'Voice)
- space to record the child's comments (Child's Voice)
- link to EYLF or MTOPI Learning Outcomes.

Of course, we would also include the date and the name(s) of the child or children involved, as we do with all our documentation.

Let's look more closely at each of these elements:

Title: Like every good tale, a Learning Story needs a title. Choose one that captures the essence of the experience – something catchy. Ask older children to choose the title themselves, because after all it is a story about their learning.

Photograph(s): Include at least one photograph; more if you like, but only include those that are relevant and large enough to see the detail.

Text: Write in the first person 'I', and with the reader(s) in mind, so that they feel that they were there too. Provide a little background on what led to the experience or why you chose to document it, and when and where it occurred. Next, introduce the child/ren involved. Describe what you saw them do and heard them say. Quote any comments you feel are significant. Include any pertinent decisions they made, and the consequences. As stated earlier, write from the heart and write as a privileged observer.

Example: Josie had been painting a while when I saw her make a hill by pushing the paper toward the paint tray. I had never seen anyone do this before, so I began to take pictures ... Josie watched intently as the drip slowly made its way to the bottom of the hill. (Taken from Josie's Drip)

What it means: In this section, write as if you are speaking to the child about what happened. After all, you will read it to them later, as will their parents.



Describe what happened, say why you think the event is significant to the child, and draw the child's attention to any learning dispositions demonstrated and which might be important to their life-long learning.

Example: Josie, you discovered how to make paint draw a line by sliding down a hill. You concentrated on how it moved. Not only were you a painter, today you were a scientist. You did an experiment. You watched the effect of the hill on the drip that you caused. That careful looking is how scientists discover how things work. You wondered about something and figured it out. (Taken from Josie's Drip)

Opportunities and Possibilities: For this element, write about how you might encourage and extend on the dispositions, interests, abilities, understandings and the play that you have witnessed. Ask parents and children for their ideas.

Example: Josie seems to have a disposition to wonder and be intrigued with the physical properties of paint that is worth exploring in greater detail. We can bring out the easels tomorrow with thick paint and water that she can mix. Eye droppers may help, too. We will want to show these drip lines to the other children, for it may spark their interest, too. Then a group of children might have some ideas of what to try next. (Taken from Josie's Drip)

Parents' Voice: Provide a space for parents to comment. They may write comments meant for the child or the educators. Initially, you might need to explain to parents that Learning Stories, including their comments, are written so that they can be read to the children.

Example: (To Josie) Josie you are amazing. I see you do this kind of close looking many times. Now you can see yourself doing it, too. (To the educators) It was a joy to read this story to Josie. We read it over and over again. I never would have paid any attention to those horizontal lines at the bottom of her painting without seeing the pictures of her absolute concentration in making them. Thank you, for stopping to look at this precious person we love. (Taken from Josie's Drip)

Child's Voice: Read the Learning Story to the child/ren. Ask older children to comment, and then write their comments down. Educators working with younger children may interpret their response (as they do with their communications throughout the day).

Link to Learning Outcomes: Read through the EYLF or MTOP Learning Outcomes and note down those relevant to the experience.

How many Learning Stories do we have to write each week?

Educators do not need to write a set number of Learning Stories in any given length of time. They are able to judge for themselves how many they should write. Quality, not quantity, is what matters. The goal is to demonstrate that the program is based on individual children's knowledge, ideas, cultures, abilities and interests.

What to do with completed Learning Stories

Educators file and/or display Learning Stories in many different ways. Some keep a scrapbook in each room where the educators paste Learning Stories for everyone to enjoy. Others display them on the wall and replace them regularly. Yet others file them in children's individual files or portfolios.

When the Learning Story involves more than one child, educators often add them to the portfolios of each of the children involved. Sometimes they add them unchanged. On the other hand, they might edit the Learning Story to emphasise that particular child's involvement and learning; include photographs that focus on that child; add the child's comments; modify the section on What it Means and that on Opportunities and Possibilities; and, select the EYLF or MTOP Learning Outcome(s) that apply to that particular child.

Who should be given a copy?

All interested stakeholders should have access to a copy.

Summary

The NQS does not require educators to document using Learning Stories. However, Learning Stories do satisfy many of the NQS requirements. They are a useful addition to educators' range of methods when documenting children's learning. An insightful Learning Story can result in a story that the child, their parents and educators will cherish and revisit for years to come.

Dr Brenda Abbey www.childcarebydesign.com.au is an early education and care consultant who specialises in the NQS, EYLF and MTOP.

She develops NQS profiles of services, conducts workshops and produces EYLF and MTOP resources. Brenda can be contacted via email: info@childcarebydesign.com.au

or via her website www.childcarebydesign.com.au.

