Anecdotal records: A powerful tool for ongoing literacy assessment

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A great deal of attention is being paid to the assessment of process in addition to product in reading and writing. Observing the process a student uses provides the teacher with a window or view on how students arrive at products (i.e., a piece of writing or an answer to a comprehension question). This allows the teacher to make good decisions about how she or he might assist during the process or restructure the process in order to best support more effective use of strategies and students' development as readers and writers. Anecdotal records can be written about products or can include information about both process and product. As process assessment, resulting from observation, anecdotal records can be particularly telling.

Observations of students in the process of everyday reading and writing allow teachers to see for themselves the reading and writing and problem-solving strategies students use and their responses to reading and writing. Genishi and Dyson (1984), Jaggar (1985), Pinnell (1985), Y. Goodman (1985), Galindo (1989), and others discuss the need to observe children while they are involved in language use. Goodman notes:

Evaluation provides the most significant information if it occurs continuously and simultaneously with the experiences in which the learning is taking place.... Teachers who observe the development of language and knowledge in children in different settings become aware of important milestones in children's development that tests cannot reveal. (Goodman, 1985, p. 10)

When teachers have developed a firm knowledge base that they can rely on in observations of students' reading and writing, they usually prefer recording their observations in anecdotal form. This is because the open-ended nature of anecdotal records allows teachers to record the rich detail available in most observations of literacy processes and products. The open-ended nature of anecdotal record taking also allows teachers to determine what details are important to record given the situation in which the student is reading/writing, previous assessment data, and the instructional goals the teacher and student have established. In other words, what is focused on and recorded depends upon the teacher, the student, and the context, not on
the predetermined items on a checklist.

Taken regularly, anecdotal notes become not only a vehicle for planning instruction and documenting progress, but also a story about an individual. The definition of an anecdote is "a short narrative (or story) concerning a particular incident or event of an interesting or amusing nature" (The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, 1966). A story is "a way of knowing and remembering information—a shape or pattern into which information can be arranged... [Story] restructures experiences for the purpose of 'saving' them" (Livo, 1986, p. 5). Anecdotes about events in the reading/writing life of a student tell an ongoing story about how that child responds to the classroom's literacy environment and instruction. Since stories are how we make sense of much of our world, anecdotal records can be a vehicle for helping us make sense of what students do as readers and writers. In addition, teachers find that telling the story accumulated in anecdotal records is a natural and easy way to impart information about students' literacy progress to parents and others who care for the children.

In short, anecdotal records are widely acknowledged as being a powerful classroom tool for ongoing literacy assessment (Bird, 1989; Cartwright & Cartwright, 1974; Morrissey, 1989; Thorndike & Hagen, 1977). In this article we will provide information about techniques for collecting and analyzing anecdotal records. In addition, we will review uses of anecdotal records including planning for instruction, informing parents and students, and generating new assessment questions.

Techniques for writing anecdotal records

Reflecting about techniques for writing anecdotal records can positively affect both the content of the records as well as the ease with which they are recorded. Thorndike and Hagen (1977) suggest guidelines for the content of anecdotal records that teachers may find helpful:

1. Describe a specific event or product.
2. Report rather than evaluate or interpret.
3. Relate the material to other facts that are known about the child.

We have found these points particularly helpful if teachers feel that the content of their previous anecdotal records has not been useful to them. Below we have included an example of an anecdotal record for a first grader, Eleanor. Note how Eleanor's teacher uses detailed description to record how Eleanor is starting to understand sound/letter relationships but is still confused about word boundaries and sentences.

Eleanor
STRDAIPADENBSNO
(Yesterday I played in the snow)
STRDA = yesterday
I = I
PAD = played
EN = in
B = the (said "du" and thought she was writing "D")
SNO = snow
Showed her how to stretch her words out like a rubberband—doing it almost on own by SNO. E does have a fairly good grasp of sound/letter relationships. However, has a hard time isolating words and tracking words in sentences in her mind. That may hold up progress for awhile. Asked her—at end—what she did in writing today that she hadn't done in previous writing. She said, "I listened to sounds." Told her to do it in her writing again tomorrow.

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Instead of recording the descriptive detail found in Eleanor's anecdotal note, the teacher might have written, "Eleanor sounded out words in writing for the first time today and will continue to need lots of help to do so." A general conclusion such as this is not as useful to instructional planning or to documenting progress as the detailed description in the note written by Eleanor's teacher. However, we believe that Thorndike and Hagen's points should be treated as guidelines, not as strict rules. We find that it is sometimes helpful to evaluate or interpret what has been observed.
For example, read the sample anecdotal record below written about Katie, a fourth grader.

Katie
I asked if I could read more of the poetry book she had written at home over the last two years. (She had read selected poems to her classmates earlier.) She showed me a poem she didn't want to read to the class “because they wouldn't understand.” (It's quite serious and deep.) Poetry doesn't look like poetry though she reads it as poetry—could use a formatting lesson.

The teacher's comment, “could use a formatting lesson,” in Katie's note provides useful evaluation and interpretation as long as it is supported by a description of the event or product itself. The comment “Poetry doesn't look like poetry though she reads it as poetry,” is the description that supports the interpretive comment.

Observational guides can be valuable complements to anecdotal recording because they serve to remind teachers what might be observed. If teachers find an observation guide helpful, they may want to post for themselves a list of the kinds of observations that might be recorded anecdotally. The table illustrates such a guide resulting from teachers' brainstorming. The list is displayed in a place in the classroom where the teachers can easily consult it, especially when they feel they need to improve the content of their notes.

In addition to increasing the content value of anecdotal notes, teachers also are concerned about increasing the ease with which anecdotal notes can be recorded. In part, ease of recording emanates from the classroom environment the teacher has established. Classroom routines that encourage students to be increasingly independent and responsible as readers and writers enable teachers to more easily record anecdotal records than classrooms in which literacy tasks are more teacher directed. Once students are familiar with and secure about the structure and behaviors demanded in routines such as Sustained Silent Reading, Author's Circle, Literature Circles, Writers’ Workshop, and Readers’ Workshop, teachers can find the time to work with and record observations of individuals or groups.

In addition to encouraging student independence and responsibility in literacy situations, it is easier to write anecdotal notes as teachers discover recording techniques that fit their styles and busy classroom lives. It is useful to carry a clipboard to a variety of class-
room settings, using such complementary recording tools as sticky notes to transfer information to a notebook sectioned off by students' names. Teachers can take notes on a prearranged list of children each day, labeling sticky notes with the date and the names of students to be observed. This technique makes it possible to take notes on every child a minimum of once a week in each curricular area in which notes are taken. Students can keep records too. Following a conference, the teacher might ask the student to record a summary statement of what they worked on together, what the student learned, or what the student still had questions about or wanted help with. Students can use sticky notes too so that their notes may be placed in the notebook along with the teacher's notes.

Teachers can take notes on groups as well as on individuals. For example, in working with a group of Chapter 1 students, one teacher noted that all five students were having difficulty putting the information they were gathering from books into their own words as they took notes. Instead of writing the same information five times, she wrote it once and put the note in a spot in her notebook reserved for notes about the group. When a note is taken in a group, but applies only to selected students in the group, the note can be photocopied for the file of each student to whom it applies.

**Analyzing anecdotal records**

Good techniques for recording anecdotal notes must be matched with good techniques for analyzing those notes if the potential for anecdotal records is to be realized. Effective analysis techniques include making inferences from the notes, looking for developmental trends or patterns within individuals and across children, identifying both strengths and weaknesses in learning and teaching, and making time for analysis.

**Making inferences.** Teachers continually make inferences about students' reading and writing on the basis of observations. Looking back at the sample anecdotal record on Eleanor, you can see that Eleanor's teacher made one of her inferences explicit: "E does have a fairly good grasp of sound/letter relationships." Because the teacher observed that Eleanor was able to consistently produce letters that matched the sounds she heard, she was able to infer that Eleanor had developed knowledge of sound/letter relationships.

Katie's teacher doesn't explicitly infer anything in the first anecdotal record but it is

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**Teacher-generated observation guide**

- functions served in reading/writing
- engagement in reading/writing
- what appears to impact engagement in reading/writing
- what aspects of text student attends to
- interactions with others over reading/writing
- interactions with materials
- insightful or interesting things students say
- hypotheses students are trying out in reading/writing
- misconceptions students have
- miscues students make while reading
- changes students make in writing
- how students use text before, during, and after reading
- how a lesson affects students' reading/writing
- comparisons between what students say and what they do
- plans students make and whether/how plans are amended
- how, where, and with whom students work
- what students are interested in
- what students say they want to work on in their reading/writing
- what students say about reading/writing done outside of school
- how students generate and solve problems in reading/writing
- ideas for reading/writing lessons and materials
- how students "symbol weave" (use multiple symbolic forms)
- how students theorize or talk about reading/writing
- how one reading/writing event relates to another
- how students use a variety of resources in reading/writing
possible for us to hypothesize that Katie may think she is different from many of her classmates with regard to what she thinks and writes. An analysis of other anecdotal records on Katie may lead the teacher to uncover a pattern in Katie’s responses that confirms her hypothesis.

**Identifying patterns.** Patterns of behavior can be uncovered for individuals and groups by reading and rereading anecdotal records looking for similarities and differences. For example, the following two notes were taken during a reading period in a second-grade classroom in which the majority of the students elect to read in pairs or small groups. What pattern of behavior do you see?

Brooke & Larry reading a Nate the Great story together—switching off at each paragraph. Brooke jumps in to correct Larry or give him a word at the slightest hesitation.

Aaron & Shawn reading—switching off after every 2 pgs. Shawn loves the story—keeps telling Aaron the next part will be funny & chuckling as he reads aloud. Shawn is the leader in this situation. He interrupts with immediate help when Aaron hesitates with a word.

In recording and reviewing these notes, the teacher noticed that she had observed the same problem in both pairs of readers: one reader would take over the responsibility for working out words from the other reader. Since she had notes on only two pairs of students, however, the teacher interviewed the class the next day, focusing on what they did to help classmates who encountered difficult words to find out whether the pattern she had uncovered in these two situations was a more general problem. Differing patterns in language use, both oral and written, can be seen through regular anecdotal record keeping.

To illustrate with another example, a second-grade teacher, one of our practicum students, was concerned about Raul, who was new to the United States. She felt he was gaining more control over written and oral English, but she had nothing to document his progress. Moreover, she did not want to push him too hard if he wasn’t ready, or cause him to lag behind. The following are excerpts from anecdotal records Sally took as the practicum supervisor while observing Raul working with his peers, none of whom spoke his native Spanish. These notes demonstrate not only his interaction with print, but also his use of oral language.

The boys begin reading through the questions. Raul looks at the book and says, “*Qué es esto*?” (What is this?). No one answers him.

They are sitting next to a chart that has all their names on it. They proceed to copy each others’ names from the chart. Raul says to the group, “You can get my name from the chart.”

T [the teacher] comes over to see what they are doing. She asks which question they are on. Raul replies, “Where do they live? Water.” T reminds them to write the answer in the appropriate square.

Using these and other notes, the teacher was able to see patterns in Raul’s use of language on two levels, interacting with print, and interacting with peers. Getting no response when he initiated interaction in Spanish, Raul proceeded to use English to read from the chart, read from the book, speak to his classmates, and respond to his teacher. Together the teacher and Sally were able to plan for how his use of English could continue to be encouraged in context-laden situations without worrying about pushing him too fast.

**Identifying strengths and weaknesses.** Anecdotal records can be analyzed for both strengths and weaknesses in students’ reading and writing. Katie’s anecdotal record, which we discussed already, reveals that she writes poetry for herself outside of school and that she has a sense of audience. These are strengths. The record also reveals an area in which Katie can grow—formatting the poetry she writes. A look back at Eleanor’s note also reveals strengths and weaknesses. For example, the teacher discovered that Eleanor has graphophonic knowledge not previously revealed in her writing and that she could verbalize what she learned during the conference with the teacher. The teacher also discovered that Eleanor had previously been using random strings of letters in her writing because she had such difficulty tracking words in sentences in her mind.

**Finding time for analysis.** Finally, just as it is important to find time to record anecdotal records, it is important to find time to analyze anecdotal records. Some analysis occurs concurrently with recording anecdotal notes and is recorded along with a description of the event that was observed. However, other analysis follows the recording of notes. We recommend that teachers try two things to make time for such analysis. First, use the start of each instructional planning period for an analysis of anecdotal records for individuals and
groups. This will serve to focus planning time so that it may be used more efficiently. Second, if teachers meet on a regular basis with other teachers, analyzing anecdotal records can be a fruitful part of the meeting. For example, if a classroom teacher and Chapter 1 teacher both take anecdotal records on the same child, they can analyze both sets of notes together by comparing individual notes and looking for shared patterns and trends. If a group of teachers from the same grade level meets regularly, an analysis of one another's notes may uncover a great deal to talk about, including how best to adapt teaching to students' needs.

**Uses of anecdotal records**

Analysis of anecdotal records allows teachers to find patterns of success and difficulty for both individuals and groups of students. Students who have a need for particular information or for particular kinds of reading and writing opportunities can be grouped together and provided with the information or opportunities meeting their needs. In addition to instructional planning, the records also can be used to inform students and parents about progress and the value of various instructional and learning contexts. Finally, anecdotal records can help teachers generate new assessment questions.

*Instructional planning.* To extend what Genishi and Dyson say about oral language to written language (1984), anecdotal records on children's social behaviors and responses to written language can help teachers plan stimulating situations for the reluctant as well as the enthusiastic reader/writer. Using the set of anecdotal notes taken in the second-grade classroom during buddy reading discussed previously, we will show how the earlier analysis we provided can lead naturally to an instructional plan.

To review, the teacher noted that students in the buddy reading activity were taking reading responsibility away from their classmates when they hesitated or showed any sign of difficulty with reading words. When she interviewed the class the next day to glean more information about why this happened, she found that few students knew any options for helping partners with difficult words except to tell them the words. These assessment data helped the teacher plan lessons to demonstrate how to help readers retain responsibility for figuring out difficult words. For example, she talked to the children about the strategies she used with them—providing plenty of wait time, suggesting that they read on, suggesting that they reread, and so on. Then she demonstrated each of these strategies with a child and made a list of the strategies for the children to refer to. Finally, she ended the next several reading sessions early so that the children could share with her and each other the strategies they used to successfully figure out their own words and to assist peers in figuring out words they didn't know. The children also shared problems they encountered and talked about how to solve them.

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During the week the class focused on improving their strategies, the teacher observed pairs as they read, provided individual coaching for some, recorded more anecdotal notes, and used the notes to couch her lessons in detailed examples. In short, though the original anecdotal records and class interview were the basis of her first lesson, the anecdotal notes taken after the lessons began became equally important in planning ongoing instruction to further develop the students' strategies and understanding.

*Informing.* In addition to using anecdotal records for planning ongoing instruction, teachers also may use them to periodically inform others, including the students themselves, about students' strengths, weaknesses, and progress. Reviewing anecdotal records with students helps them see the growth they have made as readers and writers, and helps them gain a sense of progress over time and learn to pinpoint where improvements need to be made. To illustrate, one Chapter 1 teacher who involved students in generating instructional goals claimed that the process of writ-
ing anecdotal records affected the students’ attention to the goals they had set: “The children seem to get more focused faster since I started carrying a clipboard and taking notes. It seems to remind them about the goals they decided to work on.”

Anecdotal records also can help teachers create support systems for students outside the classroom. Report cards, parent conferences, and staffings are all situations in which instructional planning can take place on the basis of the teacher’s analysis of anecdotal records. Specific examples pulled from anecdotal records help parents or other school personnel see the child in the same way as the teacher who has collected the anecdotal records. They can augment the home or test information provided by others and provide clues about what contexts are and are not supportive of the child’s learning in school.

Generating new questions. Analyzing anecdotal records and using them to plan instruction encourages teachers to generate new questions that lead full circle to further assessment of students and of teaching itself. One teacher commented, “As I review kids’ notes, sometimes even as I write them, I realize what else I need to find out.” Bird (1989) commented that anecdotal records “not only guide [a teacher] in her instructional decision making but also provide her with a frequent opportunity for self-evaluation, enabling her to assess her role as a teacher” (p. 21).

We agree, and find that the use of anecdotal records to inform instruction helps teachers become more aware of how their instruction is interpreted by students. Teachers are able to see how they can influence students’ interactions with each other as well as with books and other materials through specific instructional practices. To illustrate, below are some assessment questions generated by the teacher who recorded the anecdotal notes on pairs of students who were reading together in her classroom:

• What effect will the planned lessons have on students’ interactions over words during reading?

• What other interactions do students have with each other over ideas in the story when they read together? (Her notes about Shawn led her to wonder this.)

• Do different pairings during reading make a difference in how readers interact with each other? What kinds of pairings are optimal?

• In what other situations is Shawn a leader? What can be done to further encourage that side of him?

The teacher has come full circle. Her original anecdotal notes were analyzed and used to plan instruction. But the notes also led to more focused assessment of individuals as well as assessment of a wider range of students and incidents. Her analysis and instructional planning led her to consider new assessment questions, questions not only about the students’ reading but also about the effect of her teaching on their reading. For this teacher and for others who have realized the potential of anecdotal records, these “stories” are the basis from which they assess both their students’ learning and their own teaching.

Conclusion

Anecdotal records are a powerful tool for collecting information on an ongoing basis during reading and writing and for evaluating the products of instruction. Keeping anecdotal records on a regular basis can enhance a teacher’s classroom observation skills. Teachers report that they see and hear with more clarity when using anecdotal records, by focusing more intensively on how children say things and how they interact with each other.

Anecdotal records are advantageous not only for planning instruction but for keeping others informed of children’s progress in reading and writing and for focusing future assessment. When teachers discover the value of anecdotal records and figure out techniques to embed them in classroom literacy events and planning, anecdotal record keeping becomes a natural and important part of teaching and learning.

References


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