

Focused anecdotal records assessment: A tool for standards-based, authentic assessment

Teachers can use this technique to develop common ground for authentic assessment in a standards-based environment.

Atension exists between macrolevels and microlevels of assessment, according to Valencia and Wixson (2000), yet there is common ground. In the current U.S. educational environment, standards-based measures dominate assessment (Johnston & Rogers, 2002). Yet, over the past two decades, qualitative measures for assessment purposes, and observational records in particular, have expanded considerably (Bird, 1986; Fishman & McCarthy, 2000). On a macrolevel, content standards arguably supply systematic criteria for quantitative measures to report trends and establish policy. On a microlevel, qualitative measures such as rubrics, student profiles, and anecdotal records provide measures that fill in the gaps to give teachers immediate information to plan for instruction. The purpose of this article is to describe a technique for anecdotal records assessment that uses the lens of content standards for an initial focus. As a classroom teacher and as a teacher educator, I sought to develop a teacher-friendly, standards-based way to address recording, managing, and using anecdotal records for authentic assessment purposes. I call the system focused anecdotal records assessment (ARA).

Why anecdotal records assessment?

Observational notes as a technique for recording a child's natural literacy experiences emerged from qualitative research (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw,

1995; Guba & Lincoln, 1982; Lofland, 1971; Patton, 1990). Applying observational techniques for classroom-based, ongoing assessment has been called a variety of names such as alternative, informal, or authentic assessment (Cole, Ryan, & Kick, 1995; Reutzler & Cooter, 2004; Tierney, 1999). I prefer the term *authentic assessment*, as opposed to *alternative assessment*, because it is not defined by a juxtaposition to standardized assessment. Authentic assessment is defined by the active role the teacher plays in classroom-based assessment of actual literacy experiences. Taking observational notes allows the teacher to record a wide range of authentic experiences and even unintended outcomes of literacy development. These notes are used to record objective and subjective information as well as affective information, such as levels of engagement, curiosity, and motivational factors (Baker, Dreher, & Guthrie, 2000; Wigfield, 1997). With focused ARA, content standards initially frame the field of vision to guide observation; however, it is not designed to preclude the observation and recording of a full range of experiences related to reading and the language arts.

Being a teacher calls for skilled techniques in observing children, recording, and managing authentic assessment data. Recording observational data "explicitly depends on the human expert" (Johnston & Rogers, 2002, p. 381), the kid watcher (Goodman, 1978), and the sensitive observer (Clay, 1993). In other words, the one closest to the classroom experience is in a unique position to see and communicate a reliable and valid instructional perspective of the child. Rhodes and Nathenson-Mejia (1992) identified anecdotal records as a powerful tool for literacy assessment. Miller-Power (1996) argued that systematic, daily recording of children's actions was essential to generate focused instructional planning.

Anecdotal records in particular have been used as one of multiple tools in authentic literacy assessment (Pils, 1991; Valencia, Au, Scheu, Kawakami, & Herman, 1990). Anecdotal records assessment is an essential component in the development and interpretation of student portfolios (Klenowski, 2002; Valencia, 1998). In addition, Rollins-Hurely and Villamil-Tinajero (2001) used observational records to assess the language proficiency of English learners.

A fundamental purpose of assessment is to communicate what the child knows and is able to do. Teacher-generated, anecdotal records provide an insider's perspective of the child's educational experience (Baumann & Duffy-Hester, 2002; Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990). This perspective is vital to communication with the child and the child's family about academic progress. Anecdotal records also facilitate assessment conversations (Johnston, 2003) as educational professionals describe their observations of student learning and consider ways to develop appropriate strategies to build on strengths and address academic needs. The more focused the observational records, the more helpful they can be in making daily decisions about instructional approaches.

A collection of techniques

Focused ARA employs content standards to initially focus observations. It uses several techniques for recording standards-based notes and a simple format for managing multiple records. It also supplies a way to analyze records and a place to address instructional recommendations. To more fully answer the question of what focused ARA is, I discuss each component of the process of standards-based, anecdotal records assessment in a problem-and-solution format. The five components to be addressed are as follows: observing children in instructional settings, maintaining a standards-based focus, making anecdotal records, managing anecdotal records, and using anecdotal records for assessment.

1. Observing children in instructional settings

In attempts to record observations of children, two problems emerge: limited time and how to compose quality records. This two-fold challenge

is illustrated by the following example. Each week, I observe teachers working with groups of students. They may be leading a discussion of a children's book. They are excited by the adrenaline rush they get when students authentically respond to reading. The students are making personal connections to the story and insightful comments, and they are asking probing questions. The lesson comes to a close just as the recess bell rings. The class files out the door to play. The student teacher desperately needs a bathroom break. Now what?

Observations must be recorded before the moment is lost to short-term memory. There is no time. The teacher draws a blank and is confronted with a host of perplexing questions: What should I write? How do I start? How did what I saw match up with content standards? What do I do with the information? How can I record information that will be readily accessible in the future? If I write one note about the students, how can I avoid rewriting the notes in each of their files? The observational data is at risk of being lost.

Observing children requires planning and preparation. In order to address the time constraints of the classroom, select which students to observe ahead of time. Avoid attempting to observe everybody all at once. I recommend dividing the students into four groups with five to seven in each group. Monday through Thursday of each week, observe a different group. On Fridays, observe the students who were absent or require further observation. In other words, the teacher focuses on only a handful of students to observe each day. This simple organizational technique can keep the teacher from drowning in anecdotal record taking. Another way to address time constraints is the use of adhesive computer address labels for writing the records (Rhodes & Nathenson-Mejia, 1992). Prior to observing, write the current date and the student's initials on each label. All that the teacher carries, then, are five to seven dated and initialed blank labels. I also recommend carrying a few extra labels just in case it becomes necessary to write further observations. Selecting students and preparing the labels for recording observations will save valuable time, but having tools in place is only part of the solution. Prior to observation, one needs to establish a focus.

2. Maintaining a standards-based focus

Reality is complex. When confronted with myriad situations that take place during instruction,

it is easy for the teacher to become distracted and neglect to observe actions directly related to the subject of instruction. Think of how experienced photographers approach taking pictures. They are experts at drawing the eye to a subject and, prior to entering the studio, will sketch a series of poses to establish a dominant focus for the pictures. In contrast, inexperienced photographers often take pictures without realizing that the foreground or background images create significant distractions.

In much the same way with anecdotal record taking, teachers require a dominant focus to avoid being distracted by disruptive or unusual behaviors, personality differences, and so forth. This is not to exclude important information about a student that a teacher should note. There are a number of tools for inventory and survey of developmental levels, interests, unique qualities, and affective aspects of the reading process (for a comprehensive listing, see Reutzel & Cooter, 2004). But, in order to train the eye for observing instructional experiences related to content standards, a dominant focus must be established. Teachers already do this with lesson planning; therefore, it follows to use the selected content standard for observational purposes.

Establishing a content standard focus has several advantages. First, it directs the attention of the teacher to persistently observe what students know and do with regard to specific instructional content. (Consequently, the teacher resists distraction in a given moment of instruction.) Second, the verbs in well-written content standards facilitate composing observational data. The verbs initiate the focus for observation.

The field of vision for observation is set by the verbs found in each standard. Are the students, for example, *identifying* vocabulary or *matching* words to pictures? Are they *asking* clarifying questions or *retelling* the story? Borrowing the key verbs from the content standard saves time with on-the-spot composing of anecdotal records. The teacher is not wasting time trying to think of what to record because, prior to instruction, the content standard was selected and the key verbs noted. The verbs in Table 1 were extracted from the California Reading/Language Arts Framework for California Public Schools (1999) Content Standards and organized according to various facets of reading and language arts. (This is not an exhaustive list.)

TABLE 1
Meaningful verbs for writing anecdotal records

Strategies	Listening	Writing	Reading	Speaking
Uses (strategies)	Distinguishes	Writes	Blends	States
Organizes	Determines	Prints (legibly)	Reads	Describes
Generates	Recognizes	Spells	Tracks	Shares (information)
Classifies	Identifies	Illustrates	Decodes	Recites
Compares	Responds	Capitalizes	Follows words	Represents
Contrasts	Asks	Defines	Rereads	Relates
Matches	Questions	Indents	Uses references	Recounts
Plans	Clarifies	Describes	Studies	Retells
Provides	Discerns	Summarizes	Highlights	Reports
Connects (ideas)	Analyzes	Organizes		Concludes
Arranges	Follows directions			Quotes
Supports	Reacts			Delivers
Confirms	Points out			Requests
Selects	Points to			Asks
Chooses	Gestures			Indicates
Demonstrates				Confirms
Presents				
Clarifies				

The focus, initially established by the content standards, guides observation for assessment. This is not to advocate a rigid and narrow field of vision. Experienced teachers observe and record multiple features of student performance at a glance. However, using a selected content standard as a point of reference ensures that an instructional focus is maintained during an observation period.

3. Making anecdotal records

Following instruction, write specific anecdotal records on adhesive address labels that have been dated for reference. Once records are taken, the labels are peeled off and then pasted to a specially designed form—one per child. Maintaining a key with a listing of the selected standards is highly recommended. The standards key provides a place to record and collect selected standards for future analysis of the anecdotal records (see Table 2).

Writing quality anecdotal records is facilitated by keeping in mind the following considerations: Write observable data, use significant abbreviations, write records in the past tense, support records with examples as evidence, don't use the C-word (*can't*), and avoid redundancy.

Write observable data. In order to ensure writing quality records, there are several questions that clarify the word choice for observable data. First, close your eyes and ask yourself these questions: Does the wording tell me what the student is doing? Do I see the child matching words to pictures?

Is that an observable action? Conversely, a favorite phrase from the lexicon of expressions commonly used by educators is “on task.” If you close your eyes and try to imagine what “on task” looks like, you draw a blank.

Two more questions deal with quantitative data: How many and how much? What you can count can be observed. How many words were spelled correctly? How many times did the student self-correct? How much time did the student read independently? Conversely, avoid using phrases that imply an embedded interpretation, such as “a lot,” “a few,” or “many times.”

Some words are very tricky, such as *know* and *understand*, and yet they are essential to instruction. The reality is that one cannot directly observe the inner process of acquiring knowledge or understanding. These words are conclusions drawn from a composite of a student's demonstration of a skill or expression of summarizing or synthesizing concepts. We realize that a student has gained understanding by observing related actions. Children demonstrate their knowledge or understanding by responding to questions or performing a task. Note the difference in these kinds of records:

Observable: “Wrote 3 sentences,” “Read for 5 minutes,” “Misspelled 6 words,” “Defined vocabulary,” or “Answered 2 comprehension questions.”

Not observable: “Wrote a few sentences,” “Read a lot,” “Misspelled words many times,” “Knew vocabulary,” or “Understood the story.”

TABLE 2
Anecdotal records standards key

1	Date: Standard:	2	Date: Standard:
3	Date: Standard:	4	Date: Standard:
5	Date: Standard:	6	Date: Standard:
7	Date: Standard:	8	Date: Standard:

Use significant abbreviations. Table 3 provides some helpful abbreviations to speed the writing of records.

Write records in the past tense. Remember that the moment after an event takes place, it moves into the past. Knowing to write records in the past tense streamlines the composing process. There is less need to consider how to conjugate verbs. Maintaining the past tense makes for consistent and more accurate records.

Support records with examples as evidence. Include an example of what the student did. Any time the observer can cite a specific example, the record will more accurately generate a clear recommendation for instruction (e.g., “WA *picture* 3 different ways—*pitur*, *pict*r, *pitur*”). Examining the record triggers a recommendation for, *r*-controlled word lessons.

Don’t use the “C-word.” There is a temptation to use the word *can’t* when attempting to record an observation about what the student did *not* do. It is much more accurate to simply state that the student did not do a particular task than to imply that the student is unable to perform the task by

writing *can’t*. Note the difference in the following statements: “Can’t write a five-line poem” versus “Did not write a five-line poem.” The first statement is not an observation but an indictment against the student, whereas the latter expresses what did not happen, without implying a lack of ability on the student’s part.

Use the null sign \emptyset for a negative. Attempting to quickly report what was not observed proves cumbersome. It takes too many words to explain what was expected versus what was observed. A rapid way to state what was not seen is to preface the record with a null sign or the capital letter *N*. Then write the observational statement so that it reads like this: “ \emptyset —asked observational questions” or “N—identified past tense irregular verb.” The record states what was expected to be seen; only the sign places it in the negative.

Avoid redundancy. A frequent problem in writing anecdotal records is including needless repetition when the implication is obvious, such as “the student retold the story” or “the student identified the main character.” There is no need to repeat the subject. The ARA form clarifies who is being observed. The same cautionary note applies to rewriting the student’s name multiple times. We have all been

TABLE 3
Helpful abbreviations

Abbreviation	Meaning	Example
ID	Identified	ID main idea
X	Times	Misspelled <i>tried</i> 3×s
→	To or in relation to	Matched picture → words (see next example)
T	Teacher	Retold story → T
S(s)	Student(s)	Read to 4 Ss for 5 minutes
RA	Read alone	RA → 2 minutes
RT	Read with teacher	RT → 2 paragraphs
RS	Read with another student	RS entire book
SC	Self-corrected	Wrote <i>unitid</i> SC→ <i>united</i>
WA	Wrote alone	WA 3 sentences
WT	Wrote with teacher	WT 4 paragraphs
WS	Wrote with another student	WS 7 sentences
def	Defined	def 6 terms correctly
Δ (delta sign)	Changed	Δ initial focus in writing
N or \emptyset (null sign)	Did not observe	\emptyset clarifying questions

taught to write complete sentences with a subject and a predicate; however, for the sake of time, it is not necessary. With focused ARA, the subject is already identified on the label by initials. There is no need to write his or her name again, and the fact that the subject is a student is implied in the process. Rather than initiating writing with a subject, begin with a key verb: “Matched picture to vocabulary.”

4. Managing anecdotal records

Using adhesive computer address labels to record observations has several advantages (Rhodes & Nathenson-Mejia, 1992). The size forces the writer to economize. I repeat the following mantra each time I attempt to write anecdotal records: “Lean is clean; wordy is dirty.” The value of an assessment can easily be lost in a deluge of words. Succinct writing clarifies the entire process. Another advantage of using these labels is that, unlike sticky notes, the adhesive holds the labels firmly in place on ARA student forms for access later.

A single-page ARA student form is shown in Table 4. The form has several design features to facilitate managing records. There is room for up to eight observational records, and then there is a section for sorting observations into strengths or needs. After that, there is space for instructional recommendations based upon the child’s identified strengths and needs. The final section is a boxed area for noting any special needs accommodations. The teacher prepares a binder with an ARA student form for each child in the class. After anecdotal records are taken and at a convenient time during the day, the teacher simply sticks a computer address label in the appropriate box for each child. Once a child’s form is filled, it is ready for an analysis of strengths and needs and instructional recommendations.

5. Analysis of anecdotal records

Anecdotal records assessment is informed by comparing the standards to the child’s performance. The standards also inform the selection of strategies and activities for instructional recommendations. Periodically, analyze the compiled records for each student. The time between analyses may vary according to your own academic calendar. Consider analyzing the records every six to eight weeks. This is when the anecdotal records

standards key (see Table 5) becomes useful. It is difficult to remember the various standards that were selected to guide observation over a period of weeks. Therefore, the anecdotal records standards key reminds the teacher of specific standards.

Reference each standard as you comb through the anecdotal records. Decide whether or not the student met the standard. Code the records as follows: Mark the records with an *S* to indicate an area of strength in comparison with the appropriate standard; mark the records with an *N* to indicate an area of need in relation to the standards. The records occasionally note a point of information that is neither a strength nor a need, such as the student’s home language. Points of information are coded with an *I* (see Table 6). In addition, you may want to expand the range of coding to include anomalies or unique features with a *U*, or affective components of reading with an *A*. ARA is adaptable to the needs of the teacher.

Once the records are coded for strengths, needs, or information, simply list an abbreviated summary of the strengths and the needs in the space provided below the records. Separating the records into strengths and needs allows the teacher to summarize what patterns are being exhibited by the student. The summary also helps clarify and generate appropriate instructional recommendations.

Recommendations

Once the anecdotal records are summarized in terms of strengths and needs, student-specific recommendations can be made. In essence, the teacher is customizing instruction and support for the individual. To be effective and practical, the recommendations should be task oriented. New teachers have the most difficulty with this part of the process. It is not uncommon to see recommendations written as teacher strategies rather than student activities. A common trap these teachers fall into is to recommend a word wall to address any number of needs related to literacy development without specifying what the child is to do. To me, it sounds like something akin to “Take two word walls and see me in the morning.” Without a task associated to the strategy, the recommendation can be meaningless.

TABLE 4
Anecdotal records assessment form

Student's name _____		Evaluator's name _____	
1		2	
3		4	
5		6	
7		8	

Assessment statement

Summary of records: _____

Recommendation of next steps: _____

Accommodation for special needs:

Remember to write recommendations with the children's parents in mind. What would you say to parents? They would need specific tasks to do with their children, like sorting words into families of *-ar*, *-er*, *-ir*, *-or*, *-ur*. Providing task-oriented recommendations based upon the content standards clarifies the recommendations and ensures the practicality of the activity.

A quality assessment is like a well-woven fabric. Components are all interrelated. Looking

at the assessment, one can see (a) how the observations are standards based, accurately coded, and summarized in terms of strengths and needs and (b) how the selection of specific recommendations is the outcome. The relationships between components are strong. In other words, with focused ARA the recommendations are the direct result of the observation and analysis. The technique represents a complete process in observation and assessment.

TABLE 5
Anecdotal records standards key

1	Date: 9/26 Standard: Concepts about print. Identify author, illustrator, and book features.	2	Date: 9/30 Standard: Comprehension. Ask for clarification and explanation of stories and ideas. Organization and delivery of oral communication: Retell stories, including characters, setting, and plots.
3	Date: 10/3 Standard: Vocabulary and concept development. Identify simple multiple-meaning words.	4	Date: 10/10 Standard: Written and oral English-language conventions. Grammar: Identify and correctly use various parts of speech, including nouns and verbs, in writing and speaking.
5	Date: 10/17 Standard: Writing applications. Write a brief narrative based on their experiences.	6	Date: 10/21 Standard: Writing applications. Write a brief narrative based on their experiences. Spelling: Spell frequently used, irregular words correctly.
7	Date: 10/28 Standard: Vocabulary and concept development. Use knowledge of individual words in unknown compound words to predict their meaning. Vocabulary and concept development: Identify simple, multiple-meaning words.	8	Date: 11/5 Standard: Writing applications. Write a brief narrative based on their experiences. Punctuation: Use appropriate ending punctuation marks.

Applications

There are three primary applications of focused ARA: formative assessment for determining instruction that matches the strengths and needs of the students, summative assessment for conferring with families about a child's progress, and a combination of both formative and summative assessment for consultation with a support staff.

Using and maintaining focused ARA generate substantive teacher observations as formative assessment for instructional planning. In contrast to standardized testing, which is far removed from the classroom setting, focused ARA utilizes the insights of an observant teacher to provide quality instruction. The process is based upon classroom experience, performance, and content standards. It allows the teacher to design instruction built upon individual strengths and needs. Focused ARA underlines the fact that standards-based performance assessment requires a relationship with the student to match strategies and activities to strengths and needs. The recommendations are tailored to the student.

The focused ARA is a useful tool for summative assessment. It outlines teacher comments to cite observations, summarize strengths and needs, and provide well-thought-out recommendations. When reporting a child's progress in a parent conference, focused ARA can be used to cite how a child performed to meet content standards on specific dates and how the teacher planned to address strengths and needs. Summarizing strengths establishes a positive note. Parents see from the outset that the teacher is advocating on behalf of their child. Summarizing needs follows naturally and provides the foundation for individualized recommendations. In the case of special needs, the focused ARA allows for addressing accommodations.

Prior to developing an alternative plan for instruction, support staff such as administrators, specialists, counselors, and school psychologists often ask to see a record of six weeks of interventions. Focused ARA meets that requirement in an organized fashion, providing evidence of student performance and teacher recommendations. This kind of information organized on a single sheet of paper

TABLE 6
Anecdotal records

Student's name: Julia V. (pseudonym)			Evaluator's name: (Teacher)		
1	9/26	J.V.	2	9/30	J.V.
S	ID book's author, illustrator, title		S	Asked clarifying questions	
S	ID copyright, year, publisher		S	Retold beginning of story	
I	Eng. learner = Spanish		N	MisID main character	
3	10/3	J.V.	4	10/10	J.V.
S	Classified vocab. words in self-generated categories		N	Did not distinguish adjectives from verbs	
			S	Provided descriptive words to chart poem	
5	10/17	J.V.	6	10/21	J.V.
	Absent		N	Wrote 2 paragraphs	
			S	Used cluster diagram as a prewriting organizer	
			S	SC 3 words writing <i>library, trouble, and little</i>	
7	10/28	J.V.	8	11/5	J.V.
S	Used <i>aerodynamic</i> in sentence		N	Wrote 1 paragraph narrative w/assistance	
N	Matched 2 out of 5 vocab. words to definition		N	No ending punctuation in 2 sentences	

Assessment statement

Summary of records (Strengths): Asks clarifying questions; retells story beginnings; generates categories to classify words; uses descriptive words; uses prewrite organizers, self-corrects writing

(Needs): Misidentifies characters; parts of speech; writes 1 or 2 paragraphs with assistance; matching words to definitions; ending punctuation

Recommendation of next steps (Strengths): Continue to read books with her; encourage "who, what, why, how" questions; develop primary/secondary categories for words; use tree diagrams as a prewrite tool for more complex organization

(Needs): Character study and story mapping; compose cinquain poems to learn parts of speech; encourage 3 to 5 paragraph writing; match key vocab. to pictures; review ending punctuation rules

Accommodation for special needs:

N/A

can be invaluable to collaboration with the entire support system at a school site.

In sum

In an educational environment that attributes significant weight to standardized measures for assessment, focused anecdotal records assessment provides teachers with an authentic tool to record observations in light of content standards. As part of a regular observational rhythm in the classroom, the teacher can manage records, analyze observational data, and pro-

vide standards-based recommendations. The system facilitates communication between the children, their families, and educational professionals participating in the assessment process. Focused ARA is a tool to work common ground across authentic and standardized assessment.

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