What Do Lesson Records Have to Do With Effective Reading Recovery Teaching?

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One of the hallmarks of Reading Recovery instruction is ongoing, accurate, and useful record keeping. Reading Recovery teachers maintain extensive records of assessment and instructional activities in order to document and monitor each student’s progress and report to parents, classroom teachers, administrators, and the International Data Evaluation Center (IDEC). The most-important purpose of lesson records, however, is to insure that our instruction is tailored to each student’s needs:

Once you move out of ‘Roaming around the known’ and into the lesson framework you need to make clear ‘Lesson Records’ of how the child responds to your scaffolding of the tasks in each lesson. These records inform your planning and assist you in making the best teaching decisions. It is important to begin with the first lesson and to gradually get used to recording a brief note about what you did and how the child responded as it happens so that later you can return and complete the detail in your records. (Clay, 2005a, p. 37)

The processes of creating, expanding, and reviewing lesson records provide Reading Recovery teachers with self-monitoring devices and ways of framing teaching decisions that serve to keep each child’s series of Reading Recovery lessons on target. These processes ensure that our teaching remains on the cutting edge of each child’s strengths and needs, thereby creating the conditions for accelerated progress. Close observation, note taking, preplanning of lessons, and the writing of comments—carried out in combination with behind-the-glass sessions, rereading of Clay’s Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals, and school and cluster visits with colleagues—keep our teaching in line with Reading Recovery procedures and theory.

The purpose of this article is to examine the ways in which one Reading Recovery teacher’s use of lesson records supported her ability to teach effectively. Included are examples of lesson records constructed by Sarah, an experienced Reading Recovery teacher. The segments of lesson records included in this article are, of course, much neater and written in more-complete sentences than is typical in practice. Text in blue indicates comments made by Sarah during her analysis and reflection after lessons. These lesson records are presented as exemplars of one teacher’s instruction delivered to a particular Reading Recovery student, and do not demonstrate specific content for all lesson records. Lesson records assist teachers’

• planning for effective individual instruction,
• documentation of planned and systematic observation of students’ literacy behaviors,
• monitoring of each student’s progress,
• reflection on the effectiveness of instruction,
• adjustment of instruction for accelerated learning, and
• maintenance of a record of change over time in each child’s literacy development.

This article links Reading Recovery teachers’ lesson record keeping to (a) self-control, (b) self-regulation, (c) internalization of the theory and teaching procedures of Reading Recovery, and (d) self-efficacy.

Self-Control

The teacher’s success in effectively aligning her teaching moves with each individual student’s current understandings and needs is at the heart of Reading Recovery teaching. This principle requires us to direct and control our own teaching decisions, staying constantly on guard against any routine, casual use of instructional procedures:

During the 12–20 weeks of early literacy intervention lessons we do not, at any time, suggest that this child is unlikely to learn to deal with the written code. If the child is a struggling reader or writer the conclusion must be that we have not yet discovered the way to help him learn. (Clay, 2005b, p. 158)

Teachers need declarative knowledge (knowing that students need to learn how to match one-to-one, for example), procedural knowledge (knowing
how to teach for strategic behavior), and conditional knowledge (knowing when and why such teaching would be appropriate (Paris, Lipson, & Wixson, 1983). Implementing Reading Recovery instruction in the specific ways needed by each student at any moment within a lesson, however, is a never-ending challenge.

Writing Known Words Faster
Sarah, for example, knew that her student Bridget needed to gain better control of word writing. Fast production of known words would allow Bridget to focus more intently on composing and word-solving processes during writing, and provide stronger exemplars for her strategic activity. Sarah was also aware of the relevant Reading Recovery teaching procedures for learning writing vocabulary, as well as when and why it would be appropriate to carry out these teaching procedures. Yet, when she reviewed her lesson records Sarah noticed that she often did not include practice writing already-known words in order to move from “laborious scribing to fluent production” (Clay, 2005b, p. 59). To control her own teaching behavior, then, Sarah carefully reviewed the teaching procedures on pages 62–63 in Literacy Lessons (Clay, 2005b) and placed a brightly colored sticky note on the writing portion of the lesson record (see Figure 1). As she turned her lesson plan over to side two to begin story writing each day, she then pulled the sticky note off and placed it right in front of her on the table as a reminder.

During lessons, Sarah focused on her teaching and wrote only very brief notes on her lesson record. To further monitor her own teaching decisions, however, Sarah returned to her lesson record shortly after each lesson and summarized her observation of Bridget’s word-writing behavior (see Figure 2). Sarah also made brief notations in the “Comments on any Part of the Lesson” column, providing clear self-direction for her own instructional decisions (see Figure 3):

- My is not known – do not call for fast writing of this word yet.
- Model the formation of lower case y.
- Anticipate and prevent: mY.

Expanded attention to writing known words faster assisted Sarah’s achievement of a self-determined,
Teaching

short-term goal within her own teaching. This planning altered her instructional behavior to more closely match procedures described in Literacy Lessons. Sarah’s use of her lesson records, then, helped her to direct and control her own teaching behavior.

**Orientation to the Story Before Reading**

Preplanning a set of teaching steps for the new book orientation, matched to the immediate needs of a particular child, is essential for effective teaching. We must insure that the child is familiar “with the story, with the plot, with the phrases of language that he might never have heard, with unusual names and new words, and with old words used in an usual way” (Clay, 2005b, p. 91). As she planned her next book orientation, Sarah reviewed a short section from *Literacy Lessons*:

As an early procedure you might pronounce one or two words that occur in the text, ask the child to say the words, ask him what letter he would expect to see at the beginning, or even ask him to find the word (as you open the book at a suitable page). (Clay, 2005b, p. 91)

Sarah constructed a specific plan (see Figure 4) to ask Bridget to find the words *she* and *him* during her introduction of the new text, *Look for Me* (Melser, 1998). She chose to ask Bridget what letter(s) she would expect to see at the beginning of these words because her analysis of Bridget’s text reading strategies indicated that Bridget needed to firm up her disposition and ability to search for and use visual information (not simply because she needed to learn the words *she* and *him*). Sarah used her sticky note to remind herself of the specific ways she planned to implement this activity. During her teaching, she also observed Bridget’s responses very carefully. Shortly after the lesson, Sarah wrote specific, brief comments about how her student had responded (see blue text, Figure 4). Although Bridget had momentary difficulty finding the word *him*, her response also demonstrated her expanding ability to match how a word sounds with how it looks.

Creating and reflecting on these notes helped Sarah interact helpfully with Bridget’s construction of effective processing systems. Sarah observed, for example, that it may have been unnecessary to have Bridget find the word *she*, both because it was a very easy task and because Bridget had no difficulty identifying this word during her first reading of the text. Sarah’s scaffolding of Bridget’s identification of the word *him*, however, helped Bridget understand several critical features of this task, including monitoring whether the located word looked right given the letters and sounds expected.

When teachers are unsure of how and where to direct the child’s attention during literacy tasks, we tend to just keep talking — perhaps hoping that something we say will eventually make some kind of sense to the child! Sarah’s carefully constructed, explicit planning, on the other hand, allowed her to respond efficiently and effectively to Bridget’s momentary confusion as she attempted to identify the word *him*.

Prompts are not just talk! Short prompts give a maximum of information to the child using the fewest words. ‘Too much teacher talk’ interferes with solving a problem. Conversations in the lesson should be warm and friendly, but when the child must attend to something, or must pull several things together, the prompt should be short, clear and direct. (Clay, 2005b, p. 202)
Limiting unnecessary or intrusive teacher talk probably requires more than just our intent to do so, however. Instead, we must make deliberate teaching decisions based on ongoing, systematic collection of data that accurately describes each child’s current reading and writing behavior. Effective use of the lesson record form is one way in which Reading Recovery teachers collect and reflect on this data, resulting in clearer, targeted instruction.

**Self-Regulation**

Self-regulation is the capacity to plan, guide, and monitor instructional behavior “from within and flexibly according to changing circumstances” (Diaz, Neal, & Amaya-Williams, 1990, p. 130). Clay described a complex set of decisions carried out by teachers for each individual lesson, including the astute selection and judicious sharing of tasks:

The teacher’s close supervision will allow her to detect an interfering or handicapping type of response when it creeps in, and to swiftly arrange for a better response to occur. She may structure the task (for example, using a masking card or a pointer), or she may record in her notes that she must somehow shift the child to some new basis for making choices between words. Throughout the 30-minute lesson the teacher’s attention is tuned to the responding history of this one child. (2005a, p. 21)

Reading Recovery teachers operate from a complex theory of working systems for literacy acquisition. Low achievers typically encounter multiple sources of difficulty. Reading Recovery teachers should outright reject a belief in any one single cause for the reading and writing difficulties of low achievers. The lesson format for Reading Recovery teaching is already superbly designed to break each student’s particular “cycle of interacting deficits” (Clay, 2001, p. 220). This broad goal is accomplished using

- one-to-one instruction,
- with teaching activities selected to meet individual needs,
- paced and sequenced individually,
- delivered by a well-trained teacher,
- who keeps good records,
- is alert to all aspects of the pupil’s learning history during this second chance to learn,
- and adapts daily to ensure the construction of effective processing at all times despite the not-so-balanced repertoire of the struggling learner. (Clay, 2001, pp. 220–221)
Lesson records, then, should help Reading Recovery teachers stay alert to all aspects of the student’s learning history, enabling them to adapt their teaching on a daily basis with the explicit goal of helping an individual student construct effective and efficient processing systems.

As teachers create and respond to lesson records, we also increase our capacity to guide and monitor our own instructional behavior. Tharp and Gallimore (1993) define cognitive structuring as “explanatory and belief structures that organize and justify” or as “the provision of a structure for thinking and acting” (p. 63). Planning and note taking provide cognitive structures that frame teachers’ thinking and decision making.

**Learning How Words Work**

Sarah, for example, preplanned her first use of the procedures described in “5-D-3, I can take words apart” with Bridget (Clay, 2005b, p. 42) within the “Word Work” column of her lesson record (see Figure 5). She also noted Bridget’s responses to the task and whether she was able to work (a) only with support, (b) independently but slowly and hesitantly, or (c) with flexibility and fluency. Her analysis of Bridget’s patterns of responding (Estice, 1997) led Sarah to write notes in the “Comments” column concerning her observation of Bridget’s understanding, as well as reminders to herself to adapt her teaching appropriately:

- Needs more examples in order to develop familiarity with onset/rime break.
- Her responses did not demonstrate flexibility.
- Copying my model rather than thinking about parts of words.
- Emphasize “Now you break the word into two parts.”
- Find other opportunities to practice this.

These observations led Sarah to modify her teaching during the next day’s lesson, working for Bridget’s true understanding of how words can be broken into two parts.

All notes written within lesson records should be highly tentative, subject to verification or revision based on further evidence from analysis of observable behaviors. These comments, however, serve the important purpose of helping teachers maintain a focus on change over time for each child. Our early predictions of progress for each child, then, should be monitored and refined using observations and comments on lesson records (Clay, 2005a, pp. 31-32). Teachers should include enough information to usefully reflect, both during and after each lesson, on such questions as these:

- Why might the learner have responded in the way that he or she did? What does the learner appear to understand at this point in time concerning how letters within words and parts of words work?
• What was the learner’s purpose? What does he or she seem to want to learn about how words work?
• What was the specific context in which the student’s responses occurred? What characteristics of your teaching may have caused the student to respond as he or she did? What language or demonstration did you use to present the task?

This observation and reflection not only guides immediate instructional decision making, but also increases teachers’ capacity to plan, guide, and monitor our own behavior flexibly and in response to each student’s current strategies for reading and writing.

**Internalizing the Theory and Teaching Procedures of Reading Recovery**

The reiterative cycle of (a) careful review of *Literacy Lessons* procedures, (b) planning, (c) observing student literacy behavior, (d) adjusting instruction, and then (e) further analysis and planning helps teachers internalize the theory and procedures of Reading Recovery. Whether we do so consciously or unconsciously, each of us makes instructional decisions based on our current theories of the nature of reading and writing, and our current theories of the child: What do we think this child does effectively or ineffectively when reading and writing?

The daily running record, however, should serve as a check on the accuracy of our assumptions and theories about the child’s current ways of working on text:

What if a reliable behavior record does not support expectations? Unable to deny that the actual behavior did occur we probably need to adjust any of our assumptions that are not supported by recorded data.

(Clay, 2006, p. 72)

Daily analysis of running records must go beyond calculation of the child’s accuracy and self-correction ratio to a careful and accurate lesson-by-lesson analysis of the strategic behavior and sources of information used by the child (Clay, 2006). This systematic data collection includes (a) analysis of every error and attempt, (b) commenting on fluency, (c) consideration of the child’s pattern of responses, and (d) construction of a thoughtful and accurate summary statement.

**Developing Strategic Behavior for Text Reading**

Bridget’s running record for *Ten Little Bears* (Ruwe, 1976), for example, was scored at 97% accuracy, with a self-correction ratio of 1:3 and strong phrasing and fluency. Bridget hesitated on the word *then* throughout the text, and Sarah prompted her to check that her choice sounded right and looked right. Bridget also made three fluency-influenced errors on the familiar words *a* and *the*, which Sarah did not call her attention to. When Bridget monitored an error, she typically reread and then identified a known part of the word (typically at the beginning of the word) in order to self-correct. Sarah’s summary statement on Bridget’s running record demonstrated her thorough analysis of the sources of information used and neglected by Bridget:

*Meaning used predominantly for her substitutions with some attention to initial visual information. Repetition and more visual information led to three self-corrections.*

Creating this summary statement focused Sarah’s attention on the shifts she needed to engineer in Bridget’s ways of working on information during text reading. As she planned the next day’s lesson, Sarah wrote down several prompts that she might find good opportunities to present to Bridget:

*How did you know it was right?*
*Look for something that would help you.*
*Did this help? (pointing to a helpful cue)*

The direct link between systematic observation of Bridget’s strategic behavior when reading text and lesson planning supported Sarah’s use of specific, clear teaching prompts in ways that kept her own thinking in line with Reading Recovery theory and teaching procedures.

When the running record summary statement accurately and completely describes a child’s use or neglect of sources of information, but does not change significantly across multiple lessons, this lack of shift should remind teachers to make immediate and careful adjustment to teaching decisions. Some useful questions for Reading Recovery teachers to ask about their own teaching could include these:
• What were the characteristics of my teaching interventions during this lesson? Did I intervene too often?
• Have I taught in ways that lifted the student’s pace of learning?
• Did I use the same teaching prompt(s) over and over throughout the lesson, or from one lesson to the next?
• Did I actually teach each student how to monitor, self-correct, or search, or did I just remind him or her to do so?
• Was my language of instruction consistent with both the teaching procedures in Literacy Lessons and the theory underlying Reading Recovery instruction?

Self-Efficacy
Self-efficacy (the belief in your ability to influence your own thinking and behavior) increases teachers’ disposition to take action, helping each student progress quickly to discontinuing. “These beliefs affect how much effort people expend, how long they will persist in the face of difficulties, their resilience in dealing with failures, and the stress they experience in coping with demanding situations” (Goddard, Hoy, & Hoy, 2000, p. 481). Personal agency requires that teachers take responsibility for our instructional decisions, identifying success or failure based on the quality of the goals we have chosen for ourselves and of the effort we have put forth to achieve those goals (Paris, Byrnes, & Paris, 2001).

The belief that it is the quality of our teaching decisions that determine whether most students will discontinue is central to Reading Recovery teaching. Four factors promote this sense of personal agency: Success, feedback, observational learning, and social persuasion (Paris et al., 2001). Success and feedback (supporting an important shift in a student’s literacy behavior, for example) cause feelings of mastery and satisfaction. And, learning from observation and social persuasion convinces us that effective Reading Recovery teaching is truly within our reach. Influential behind-the-glass discussions and colleague visits, for example, are crucial to belief in our ability to cause immediate change in the strategies used by our students. We also, however, provide feedback to ourselves (and thus acknowledgement of the success we have achieved with students) through the effective use of lesson records. Our observation of the reading and writing behaviors of students directly influences our teaching decisions, improving the quality of our teaching (Schmitt, Askew, Fountas, Lyons, & Pinnell, 2005). Engaging in a reiterative cycle of reflection, planning, systematic observation, and improved instruction allows us to work successfully with each child. This cycle also permits us to recognize the moment-by-moment victories that occur within each child’s series of Reading Recovery lessons, thus rewarding ourselves for the small but crucial shifts achieved by each student.

Taking Words Apart While Reading
Based upon observation of her student’s current ways of taking words apart while reading, for example, Sarah tentatively decided to instruct to a higher level on the “Scale of Help” in Section 12, “Taking Words Apart While Reading” (Clay, 2005b, pp. 132–133). Sarah had observed that Bridget was already able to solve difficult words in texts when the teacher divided the word for her with a masking card. Sarah gave careful thought to changing her teaching so that Bridget herself would divide a challenging word in print in order to assist her own solving of difficult words.

Establishing this specific goal required Sarah to consider (a) if it was an appropriate goal for Bridget at that point in her progress, (b) what she might need to do to ensure that Bridget understood this new request and could accomplish it, and (c) how Sarah would know that this goal had been achieved. Sarah recorded the instructional language to explain this shift in procedures to her student, and then carefully noted Bridget’s attempts over time and the level of support needed for success on each occasion.

When Bridget read Arthur’s Loose Tooth (Hoban, 1985), for example, Sarah planned several possible examples that she might use to demonstrate the use of the mask and selected several prompts that she felt would be helpful. After the lesson, she also briefly recorded the specific ways in which Bridget attempted to use the mask herself and the type of support needed (see Figure 6). Sarah’s observations provided solid evidence that Bridget was beginning to integrate her understanding of how words work with her ability to search for and use visual information while reading and comprehending text. This shift in her student’s lit-
Literacy behavior was perhaps a small step for Bridget, but was also a crucial victory. It supported Sarah’s self-efficacy and disposition to continue analyzing Bridget’s literacy behavior and her instruction on a task-by-task basis. Sarah improved both her instruction and her aptitude for reflection, planning, observing, and analyzing.

**Summary and Cautions**

Engaging in the complex and challenging processes of lesson record keeping is an important component of teachers’ delivery of instruction and ongoing professional development. Systematic observation of teaching decisions and student responses leads to effective goal setting and feedback. Lesson records

- take on an individual character based on each teacher’s planning, reflection, and writing style and shorthand;
- provide accurate, reliable information on teaching decisions and actions, and the child’s current ways of responding;
- help teachers format their thinking and decision making in ways that are consistent with Clay’s theories of the development of complex working systems for literacy;
- support teachers’ monitoring and analysis, and assist in the adaptation of the standard lesson format to the strengths and needs of individual children across time; and
- contribute to teachers’ self-efficacy and capacity to plan, observe, and reflect.

Several important cautions, however, also need to be considered:

1. Focus primarily on teaching, not recording.
2. Pay extra attention to lesson records for hard-to-accelerate students.
3. Remain tentative and flexible.

Your primary job during every part of every Reading Recovery lesson is to teach. You will also, however, “gradually get used to recording a brief note about what you did and how the child responded” (Clay, 2005a, p. 37) during your teaching. Reading Recovery teachers typically become more comfortable, efficient, and flexible with lesson record keeping over time. Even very experienced Reading Recovery teachers, however, need to carefully preplan, observe, and make useful notes and comments on the lesson record in thoughtful ways. The lesson records of experienced Reading Recovery teachers should, if anything, be more rather than less complete.

Detailed and intense planning, observing, and documenting of student behavior and monitoring and adjusting the teaching are especially important for any child who is not showing accelerated progress. Although an appropriate referral to long-term instructional support for a

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**Figure 6. Lesson Record Example:** Taking Words Apart While Reading

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LETTER WORK, BREAKING, WORD WORK AND ANALYSIS</th>
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**Taking Words Apart**

Arthur’s Loose Tooth

Demonstrate: I can use this card to find a part of the word you know. It makes it easy to figure the word out.

- Saturday
- newspapers

Hand her the mask:
What can you see that might help?
Look for something that would help you.
Do you know a word that looks like that?

- bravest
  - Bridget masked br
  - Teacher masked brav
  - "Like the biggest one, only brave."

- upstairs
  - Bridget attempted w/o mask
  - Teacher handed her the mask
  - What can you see that might help?
  - Bridget masked up

- Teacher masked st
  - "Try it. See if it makes sense."
few children is one of the two positive outcomes of Reading Recovery instruction, teachers first need to ask ourselves from what inaccurate or incomplete assumptions about the child we may be operating. When working with a hard-to-accelerate student, Reading Recovery teachers need to reflect, using the evidence within their lesson records as well as input from colleagues, on where the child is finding portions of the reading process difficult.

The overall goal of a teacher’s work with a hard-to-accelerate child is to regroup—to fine-tune the teaching based upon careful observation and analysis of the child’s current processing systems for literacy—so that the child now begins “to orchestrate the whole process in a more satisfactory way before moving up the difficulty sequence” (Clay, 2005b, p. 182). This intensive approach to getting a hard-to-accelerate child’s series of lessons back on track requires teachers to delve deeply into lesson records (and the evidence of student behaviors and teaching decisions on which those lesson records are based). It is also useful to regularly audiotape or videotape lessons and review these with close observation of the teaching and the child’s responses. Recordings of lessons are good opportunities to add notes and comments to the lesson records beyond what you were able to write during the lesson itself, which could be especially valuable when working with a hard-to-accelerate child.

We all need to remain tentative and flexible. We, in fact, risk interfering with a child’s progress in literacy acquisition when we become too enamored of any particular theory about his or her strengths or needs. Reading Recovery teachers appreciate that the processes of learning to read and write are complex rather than stage-like or linear, and we must deliberately suspend our current interpretation in favor of ongoing observation of reading and writing behaviors. Towards these ends, Reading Recovery teachers value conversations with colleagues regarding both teaching theory and procedures and the progress of individual children. These conversations help teachers formulate and reformulate ideas and justify or alter explanations of a student’s behaviors (Lyons, Pinnell, & DeFord, 1993). In the absence of such conversations, lesson record keeping could actually support ineffective Reading Recovery teaching.

On the other hand, Sarah’s student Bridget’s Reading Recovery lessons were discontinued after 51 lessons at text level score of 16. During the year that she worked with Bridget, Sarah taught 10 Reading Recovery students in all. Eight of these students were able to discontinue. The deliberate, accurate, and useful lesson record keeping described in this article keeps Reading Recovery teaching on track. Through monitoring and self-regulation of our teaching, we are able to help most Reading Recovery students develop the strategic behaviors that will serve them well as lifelong readers and writers.

**Deliberate, accurate, and useful lesson record keeping keeps Reading Recovery teaching on track. Through monitoring and self-regulation of our teaching, we are able to help most Reading Recovery students develop the strategic behaviors that will serve them well as lifelong readers and writers.**

As Bridget was nearing the end of her Reading Recovery lessons, she and Sarah were walking together across the school playground to their Reading Recovery room for the day’s lesson. Bridget commented casually, “I can read.” Sarah responded, with some surprise, “Yes, you can.” Bridget, however, came to a complete stop and said, stamping one foot on the blacktop for emphasis, “No, I mean I can read. I went over to the shelf and just pulled out any book. I opened it up and I just started reading. I can read!” Bridget, herself, confirmed what Sarah’s lesson records indicated — she was ready to move out on her own!

**Editor’s note:** This article was first published in the Fall 2003 issue of *JRR*. Revisions have been made to reflect current understandings and terminology.

**References**


Children’s books cited


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Fall 2010 Journal of Reading Recovery 33