



Transcript for the [Audio Podcast](#):

Early Childhood Insights

An Audio Podcast Series

Using Digital Video to Enhance Observation and Assessment

Open: The Center for Early Childhood Education at Eastern Connecticut State University presents Early Childhood Insights, an audio podcast series, featuring interviews with experts on topics of interest to Early Childhood professionals.

Interviewer: Hello, and welcome to Early Childhood Insights. I'm Julia DeLapp, Program Coordinator at the Center for Early Childhood Education. Today we will be talking with Dr. George Forman about using digital video in the early childhood classroom to enhance observation and assessment. Dr. Forman is Emeritus Professor at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He is also President and co-founder of Videatives, Inc., whose mission is to make children's thinking visible through the use of short video clips with supporting text. Welcome, Dr. Forman.

Question 1: Let's start with a very basic question. Why is observation in the early childhood classroom important?

Dr. George Forman: The reason that observation is important is it gives teachers an entry into the children's thinking. In my opinion, if you want to be a good teacher, you have to enter that flow, the decision making, the strategies that children use as they try to figure things out, solve problems, wonder about things. And it happens so subtly that you may not just get it if you're not systematically observing or in some sense making a documentation of your observations. So it's not simply the observation; it's the documentation that you then study to understand what I would like to call applied intelligence, the things that happen in real time. So you're not going to get it from the final drawing or the final clay structure or the final block structure. It has to be observed over time.

Question 2: How should teachers approach observations? What kinds of things should they try to observe?

Dr. Forman: Any one particular observation, it's not going to give you much purchase on what we generally call "development," because development is kind of longer term process. But if you observe routinely and you then begin to look at your notes... and what we do a lot is video clips. Then the development begins to reveal itself. How is it that I decide what to observe? What I look for is a fairly ordinary moment in the day, but the child or children as a group are doing something purposely. And if they have a purpose or a goal, then my mind goes to a place: what is their strategy; what are they doing to reach that goal? Why does this particular strategy make sense to this child or these children? And I think that's where you enter this domain of development, because children have certain assumptions about why a strategy will work. They're trying to balance a block, and it's unequally weighted. They'll try to find the center of that block, and they'll try to balance that block and its visual center, because their assumption is that this strategy works. Well, with this block, it doesn't, so how do they compensate? What do they do to adapt? That's where you see some conflict, some problem, and do how they shift their strategies to solve it. And that's the juicy part. It doesn't really matter what you observe; what matters is that you slow down and think deeply about what you observe. Of course the skill is in how one interprets the observation.

Question 3: Let's talk about that. What do teachers need to keep in mind when they move from observation to interpretation?

Dr. Forman: We need to go beyond just what we see. And there's where over time—I'm talking about weeks—you begin to see their strategies come from a different assumption about the way the world works. I've become much more content in capturing—again, I use a lot of digital video—high level thinking. And if I can maximize the amount of high level thinking that goes on in my classroom, I think I'm doing a pretty good job. So I know there's a lot of other people who would like these notes to translate into: Where's my child on a developmental continuum. And I say, "Well, I don't know, but look at this." And I've noted a real change in my constituents when I say, "Well, I don't know where this is on a developmental scale, but this is really good. Look how clever he was and how he eliminated steps." I have a little video of a child gluing little recycled material on a 2 by 4. And he was doing it in a very one object/one dab of glue, and then he backed off and he says, "You know I could put extra glue on my spatula," and he puts it on. It's a small example; it was profound for this parent to see the child wasn't just playing; this child was thinking and was thinking about the structure of his action, and he said, "Well, I can do this more efficiently." Not for any particular reason; nobody was rushing him, it's just, that's what humans do. We are always thinking about how things work. But that's not on any developmental scale—cutting out steps—you're not going to find that in any book of standards. But it's really important to be open enough to see that that's exactly what made this little episode important for the child, for the child's parents. You know that parent came one of our biggest advocates in our school because he realized that there's so much going on in what looks like sort of an ordinary mundane episode, but observation is the key. I had my video camera going; I looked at the video camera and I had the tape. I had to look at it four times before I saw what was going on.

Question 4: So videotaping that episode, and being able to watch it again and share it with the parent, was key for you. Can you talk more about how digital video can enhance the observation and documentation process?

Dr. Forman: The last four or five years I've become very enchanted with digital video. And I make the heretical comment that I don't learn from watching children—I learn from watching video. Digital video allows you to store, index, review short clips very effectively, very efficiently. It's not that expensive, and you can wear it around your neck, so whenever something interesting is about to happen, you just lift it from around your neck,

and it's there. You can record two to four hours, and it has a little view finder, and the battery lasts for a couple of hours. Then you take the chip; you put it in the little reader, stick it in the USB port on your computer and then you can revisit it. Now let's say, what does this tool—let's call it kind of a tool of the mind—afford? How does it change the mindset of the teacher? And more and more teachers are using digital photography, and they love that. But a student of mine did a dissertation on how teachers think when holding a video camera and how teachers think when holding a still digital camera. And she found, as you might expect, that when teachers have still camera they think about the pose and the end product. But photography is a-spatial and a-temporal and video is temporal and more process oriented. So the mindset for the teachers with the video camera was, "I'm going to get to see how this happens; how the child applies their intelligence." So it's much more of a tool for a capturing process, and that's, to me right where teachers need to be to understand how to teach, how to enter the child's world, how to help them and scaffold their thinking. It's true that in observation courses, you're told to be objective. When you're there on the floor observing the children and you're taking notes, you don't want to interpret, because your biases will get in the way and you may add things that don't happen or miss things that do happen. And then you look at your notes. And you can trust that it's data, its good data, its objective. But you see, you need to interpret the notes. If you don't interpret the notes, then it has no meaning. When I say I want you to interpret, I mean AFTER you video. The camera is the objective machine; it's going to capture what happens. Then you take it and you deconstruct it. You say, "Well, what does this mean, what is this like, what might this mean?" You need to speculate, because if you don't, you're just going to be stuck with the raw data. And the way we make meaning is by relating things to other things. You're objective when you're collecting data. And you speculate when you try to make meaning from it.

Question 5: How does bringing a video camera into the classroom affect the classroom? Do children react to the camera or change their behavior?

Dr. Forman: When I come into the classroom with the video camera, number one, children notice the camera. Personally I think that helps. They sort of say to themselves, "Well, maybe I shouldn't just do this; I should sort of explain it." So there are children as young as three will do things with a bit more exaggeration or they'll slow it down, so that I can understand. You see, they're taking my perspective, because I have the camera. And I think this is good; it's a type of self-reflection. We know that experience is not a particularly good teacher—you don't just learn by doing; you learn by reflecting on what you do. Just the presence of the camera, I think, brings this level of self-reflection to play. So that's one way to bring the child into the process. The other is that often we will take the camera and we'll replay the video. The child and I will sit and watch what happened two minutes ago. And I might say to the child, "This is really interesting. Can you tell me why you did that?" A child was being very careful in driving a truck over the edge of a platform, and I could tell he was going real fast and then at some point he slows down and he goes real slow. So I said, "I noticed you did that really slowly. Can you tell me why?" And he thought for a minute. At first he said, you know "I just wanted to get the train over the edge," and I said, "Yeah, but why did you go so slowly?" And he says, "Cause I didn't want to break it." So you see, you wouldn't just tell me about his behavior; he was telling me about his motive and his intention and his reasons. And that's when I got really excited. This little gadget really moves the child to thinking about purpose and intent and motive, and I think that's important for educators to do. To help children understand their rationale.

Question 6: You mentioned instant video revisiting – can you tell me more about that?

Dr. Forman: Instant video revisiting is sort of a special use of the video camera and it works when you either

have a little monitor in the classroom where you can see the video or the fold-out view finder to see the video. And the reason this is powerful is because it's in the same place that the action occurred. So imagine the child is playing in the water table. And then you say, "Would you like to see what you just did?" Of course most children say, "Yeah!" And so you rewind it and reset it, and you say "Gee, tell me what you're doing here." They'll say, "Oh the big fish is eating the little fish." Whereas before with the video and I just say what are you doing, he says, "I'm splashing," or "I'm playing." But when they see themselves on the camera the view finder and they'll say, "Ok, well, no point in describing the action to this guy because he can see that." So they go back into the purpose of the action. So they reflect on the meaning. Because it's in context of the action, the instant video revisiting, it helps them remember; it helps them reenact it, and it's not so time lagged.

Question 7: Can video play a role in fostering strong relationships between teachers and parents?

Dr. Forman: People are more open and connect better with their own intuitions when they are in a peer relationship with someone. And that is not going to happen if one person has all the information and the other person doesn't. So we're trying to create a kind of, what I call the democratization of documentation. We're trying to democratize documentation. And that is, that we both want to look at the raw data. If you want families to be involved as intellectual partners and not just, you sharing with them your conclusions, you need to give them documents that are replete with a lot of context and information. Video is one way to do that. Like, if I were to give a parent a report on things that I've seen over the last month, like, "Your child is a risk taker. Your child loves things that spin. Your child has two really close friends." Well, what can the parent do with that? They say, "Oh, that's great, my child's doing fine." But if I give the parents an episode and say, "Well, here is how your child led this situation when this little boy was being somewhat overbearing. And notice how your child arbitrated the situation." And the parent looks at this and say, "Well yeah, but what he was REALLY doing..." and they can debate with you. They may say, "Well, I see something different." Now you've got a peer – it's not just teacher/parent; it's peer/peer. And that's what I think about certain forms of documentation. Give the parent enough information where they can engage you intellectually. And we sit as colleagues, you and me, teacher and parent, and we say, "Well, what do we think is going on here?" not, "This is what I think is going on here. Take it or leave it." Parents are a little slow to warm up to this, cause they're not real sure they've been invited in the way they think they have. But if you do this consistently, they say, "Well, this teacher's different. She wants me to contribute to the interpretation of my child's work, my child's day, my child's personality, interests, skill, strategies, theories." And it takes a little bit more time, but the rewards are amazing. And then you'll find that parents begin to bring in stories from home.

Interviewer: Thank you Dr. Forman for talking with us today (and thanks to all of you for listening.) You can watch other videos or listen to other conversations about early childhood education on iTunes U or by visiting our website.

Close: This has been a presentation of the Center for Early Childhood Education at Eastern Connecticut State University. For more information about the Center for Early Childhood Education, please visit our website at www.easternct.edu/cece. (Make sure to subscribe to this feed to get more audio podcasts in this series as they become available.)