



# SUCCESS STORIES:

## Using Video Stories to Connect, Communicate, and Create

By Jessica Roberts

Do you ever wish you had a magic wand that could get your students' attention? (And I don't mean by whacking them with it.) Do you feel the need for a translator when your students stare blankly at you or miss something you've told them a hundred times? Do you sometimes get stuck just trying to survive another day of the same old problems, too worn out to accomplish any real change?

Video Stories can help in each of these areas. Video Stories combine two research-validated teaching strategies – video self-modeling and social stories. They incorporate video clips of your student engaging in a desired skill with the essential information needed to understand that skill. This powerful teaching tool can help you connect with your students, communicate clearly and effectively what they need to know, and create true Success Stories out of seemingly insurmountable obstacles.

With camera in hand, you can hold your students' attention and interest, engage them to actively listen and learn, and capture the moments in which the students attempt each step of a new skill, with prompts as necessary. The video is then edited so it seems the students are completing the steps independently. Once the students see themselves as the "movie stars," they may begin to imitate the video and initiate the skill in various settings – almost immediately! We don't get to use the word "immediately" very often in special education, so it can infuse some intense excitement and momentum into your instruction. You may start to refer to your camera as a magic wand.

When traditional methods fail to reach your students, Success Stories can effectively teach:

- Appropriate behavior
- Schedules/routines
- Language development
- Classroom expectations

- Social skills
- Independent living skills
- Academic concepts
- And much more!

### CONNECT

Video Stories have helped me reach, motivate, and engage each of my most difficult and defiant students. One particular student gave us a run for our money, literally. Erik was in control and no amount of persuasion could convince him to cooperate. We had all the



latest behavior interventions and reinforcers in our repertoire, but they didn't work. He would do his own thing in his own time, and anything else was impossible. Sound familiar?

Erik liked to run outside and conduct an extremely detailed inspection of all the sprinkler heads around the school. One day, at lunch time, after an entire morning of psychologically draining and completely ineffective attempts at enticing him indoors, he said, "No pennies! No smiles! Just go away!" I got the camera, turned the screen so he could see himself, and said, "We get to make a movie today." Immediately, the defiant look on his face melted away, he stared at

himself in the camera with a sideways, satisfied smile like a model in a magazine, and strutted all the way into the classroom. The magic of the camera hasn't worn off yet. In fact, when I ask him to do something difficult, he says, "Camera, please." He can't get enough of himself, and has made remarkable, even miraculous improvements in behavior, communication and social skills through the process of making, reading and watching his Success Stories.

Many of you face similar challenges with students who are almost impossible to reach.

Why not try using the camera to connect with them? The camera can serve as a sort of ambassador into the highly guarded internal world of the student with autism or other significant challenges. I'd like to tell you how we first began using Video Stories in our classroom. We had another student, Derek, who was so engrossed in his own personal world, that most of the attempts we made to engage him were met with aggression, as if we were hostile intruders. One day, when I was taking pictures of the students, I cautiously asked Derek if I could take his picture. He cocked his head to the side with a smile that filled his face, and said "Cheese!" I showed him the picture and we both giggled.

We had made a strong connection. We used that connection to make many Video Stories with him. He enjoyed inserting his pictures and movies into his stories, copying the text from a model, recording his voice reading the text, and watching his Video Stories. The Video Stories became a bridge to connect his internal world with our own. We were able to develop a positive relationship with him. We were able to engage him and teach him and learn from him as well.

### COMMUNICATE

A picture is worth a thousand words. It's safe to say that a picture is worth a million words when you are dealing with students

with autism or other challenges. When your students have difficulty processing verbal language or written words, you need a new way to communicate in order for them to understand. Video combines visual and verbal information in a focused and active way that clarifies and intensifies the meaning. Video showcases the important details by cutting out all the extraneous distractions of the classroom and zooming in on what is most significant. Video engages the students to become an active part of the learning process. Also, Video Stories can illustrate the precise moment of cause and effect in which the students' actions or words result in a pleasant outcome, motivating them to try it again. Video Stories communicate clearly and effectively, because the students are receiving the message in ways that they can personally understand - visually, verbally and actively.

Video Stories not only provide an effective format for you to relate essential information to your students, but Video Stories can also help your student develop more successful communication skills. My favorite way to use the Video Stories strategy is to increase language development. Many students who have been classi-

fied as functionally nonverbal are capable of imitating short phrases. In the Video Story, you can edit out the teacher's verbal prompts, so that the student sees himself using that phrase independently rather than seeing himself following the teacher's prompts.



The student also sees that when he said that simple phrase, something pleasant happened – perhaps he got a turn to blow bubbles or a chance to take a break. For my students, this has instilled a new and dramatic sense of confidence and independence. There's no

doubt in their minds. They know they can do it because they've seen themselves on the Video Stories. They begin to initiate these simple phrases on their own, without waiting for a prompt. The communication attempts are successful, because the caregivers and peers have seen the Video Story as well, and understand the words (even if they are poorly articulated) and follow through with the desired outcome. With a few effective communication attempts, the students have gained an important new language skill and an essential measure of independence.

Even students who are truly nonverbal can benefit from using whatever mode of communication is available to them within their Video Stories. When they see or hear themselves communicating successfully in the story, they may be more motivated and confident to increase their communication attempts. The Video Stories also serve to educate the caregivers, peer tutors and classmates on exactly how the communication should play out. It gives the others some information on how to ask the right kind of questions, listen attentively and respond appropriately. If the classmates and teachers are more comfortable and consistent in

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*"The music and visuals are wonderful for engaging my students, including those with Autism and other disabilities.*

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*~ Laura Johnson, OTR*



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engaging the student, the student will likely be given more opportunities to communicate successfully.

## CREATE

Create sincere, dramatic positive change. You can compose the essential information and the video clips into a motivating movie in which the students are the stars. Present it to your students with great fanfare and celebrate their success. The students may be so excited and engaged, they may not realize they are learning important lessons. Teachers may feel a twinge of guilt, as if they're having too much fun. However, the truth is that the most powerful and permanent learning takes place when the students are personally involved, engaged and motivated. Learning can be fun. Teaching can be fun, too. You can do it!

Some teachers ask me, "How do you find the time for all this?" Just like most of you, I have a magical to-do list, something like *The Never-Ending Story*. However, the Video Stories are the most enjoyable and effective use of my time, so they inch their way to the top of the list. Also, the majority of the process of creating a Video Story is completed right there in the classroom, with the students as an integral part of the lesson. The lesson begins by introducing the new skill and modeling each step of the skill. The students are eager

to demonstrate each step and perform for the video camera. The editing process, which is the most time-consuming part of the process, can also be done with the students, so the students get to see themselves perform the skill several times, each time more and more independently. Keep in mind that if there is some inappropriate behavior on the video, you may need to edit the video on your own. The students' desire to imitate themselves is so strong that you should be careful to show them saying and doing only what you want to see them saying and doing again and again. After the editing process is finished, the students can build their own Video Stories by inserting the pictures and videos, deciding on



the right words for the text, incorporating the words with the videos and finishing it up with cool transitions or animations. Once the Video Story is complete, we review the concept by watching the story, pausing to practice, and generalizing the skill in other settings. Since the students are personally involved in the process from beginning to end, the Video Story and the new skill become their own.

## TO LEARN MORE

I have written an instructional guidebook to lead you step by step through the process of creating your own Video Stories. The book contains individual stories of how we have used the Video Story strategy to teach many different kinds of essential skills and hundreds of ideas for your own stories. It includes visual instructions from start to finish on how to capture and edit video clips, and how to make a Video Story in PowerPoint 2003, PowerPoint 2007, Windows Movie Maker and iMovie08. The book, entitled *Success Stories: Using Video Stories to Connect, Communicate, and Create True Success with Your Students*, is available on Amazon for \$16.99. You will need to put most of the title in the search engine in order to find it on Amazon.

On my classroom Web site, you can also find video tutorials on each part of the process, from opening the programs to including sophisticated animations. Go to [www.wsdstaff.net/~jroberts](http://www.wsdstaff.net/~jroberts) and click on "Success Story Instructions & Examples." The Success Story examples have a password to protect the students. The password is "Success" with a capital "S." Feel free to share your successes or ask questions at my blogs at [www.teacherslittlehelper.blogspot.com](http://www.teacherslittlehelper.blogspot.com) and <http://blog.weber.k12.ut.us/jroberts>. You may also contact me directly at [videostorieshelp@gmail.com](mailto:videostorieshelp@gmail.com).

## THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Since the students' motivation to imitate the video clips of themselves is so strong, it is best to avoid having the targeted students demonstrate an inappropriate behavior. Focus on language and behaviors that you want to see them demonstrate.
- It is necessary to receive parental permission to take pictures and video of the students.
- For non-verbal students, use whatever mode of communication they have. A video clip of them communicating successfully will likely increase their communication attempts.
- Video Stories can be shared with parents (on CD, and even DVD in some cases) to develop a common understanding of the language and steps of the skill, as well as increased success in generalizing the skill. ■

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