



Promoting Self-Determination through a Movie Project

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Abstract

The concepts of self-determination and self-advocacy have been a focus in the education of students with disabilities and many new curricula, guidelines, and materials have recently become available for educators. This article describes a project that involved individuals with intellectual disabilities in making a movie as a strategy for exploring and developing self-advocacy skills. A facilitator/ director worked with the individuals as they discussed movie ideas based on self-determination, while learning concepts and working on component skills such as self-advocacy and problem solving. The authors share what they learned during the project and provide ideas for educators to follow a similar model with their students.

Keywords

self-determination, self-advocacy, movies

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For some time, the concept of self-determination has been a key focus in the education of students with disabilities (Malian & Nevin, 2002; Paraschiv, 2000; Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Martin, 2000; Wood, Karvonen, Test, Browder, & Algozzine, 2004). Educators and parents have increasingly come to realize the important role that self-determination plays in ensuring quality of life into adulthood (Bremer, Kachgal, & Schoeller, 2003; Wehmeyer, Bersani, & Gagne, 2000). Yet, methods to promote self-determination can seem elusive, especially to educators working with students who have more significant intellectual disabilities

(Brown, Gothelf, Guess, & Lehr, 1998; Martin, Woods, Sylvester, & Gardner, 2005; Storey, 2005; Wehmeyer, 2005). Fortunately, a variety of interesting curricula, guidelines, and material have begun to be available (see Figure 1 for some examples), and they certainly provide ideas for educators. Nevertheless, incorporation of self-determination into the educational programs of students with significant disabilities continues to be inadequately emphasized despite the value that educators place on the importance of teaching students self-determination skills (Ward, 2005; Wehmeyer, 2005).

Figure 1: Resources for Promoting Self-Determination with Students who have Intellectual Disabilities

It's My Future: Planning for What I Want in My Life by The Arc:
<http://www.arcminnesota.com/res-advocacy.htm>

Read My Lips -- It's My Choice (1989) by W. Allen. Minnesota Governor's Planning Council on Developmental Disabilities, 300 Centennial Office Building, 658 Cedar Street, St. Paul, MN 55155; Phone (612) 296-4018.

My Voice, My Choice: A Manual for Self-Advocates--What You Need to Know About Participant-Driven Supports (2003) by the Human Service Research Institute. Syracuse, NY: Program Development Associates.

Materials from *Advocating Change Together*:
http://www.selfadvocacy.com/Tools_for_Change.htm

Self-Advocacy: Print and Media Resources (1995) by M. F. Hayden, B. Fijas, & E. Koeper, University of Minnesota, Research and Training Center on Residential Services and Community Living.

Self-Determination Synthesis Project, University of North Carolina, Charlotte:
<http://www.uncc.edu/sdsp>

A Teacher's Guide to Implementing the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction: Adolescent Version by M. Wehmeyer, M. Agran, S. Palmer, D. Mithaug, & C. Blanchard. The Arc of the United States, 500 E. Border Street, S-300 Arlington, TX 76010; Phone: 800-433-5255.

Self-Determination Curricula by W. M. Wood, D. W. Test, D. Browder, B. Algozzine, & M. Karvonen (2000). Available at: http://www.uncc.edu/sdsp/sd_curricula.asp

This article describes a project that involved individuals with intellectual disabilities in making a movie as a strategy for exploring and developing self-advocacy and self-determination skills. Since film and video creation is becoming an increasingly popular medium for self-expression, educators may be interested in exploring the use of this important and readily available tool. Our hope is to provide readers with some ideas on how to facilitate self-determination for students with intellectual disabilities within the context of creating a movie.

A Brief Overview of Self-Determination

As Field, et al. (1998) have summarized, the concept of self-determination as applied to the field of special education arose out of the changing societal views of disability resulting from the independent living movement, the principles of normalization, and the self-advocacy movement. As part of these various social movements, individuals with disabilities have moved to the foreground as they have continually demanded equal opportunities to have choice and control in their lives. These demands are embodied within the concept of self-determination.

Educators and researchers often focus solely on self-advocacy skills, because of the important and obvious connection between student self-advocacy skills, student-led IEPs, and effective transition planning. We tend to believe that self-determination is directly related to the extent to which one is able to get what he or she desires. Yet, it is important to keep in mind that self-advocacy is only a piece of the self-determination puzzle. Whereas self-advocacy is tied to specific outcomes, such as getting what one is advocating for, self-determination involves a broader concept whereby individuals act as causal agents in their lives through a variety of

means (Wehmeyer et al., 2000). Paraschiv (2000) compiled a list of key self-determination elements gathered through a review of the literature, and these are listed in Table 1.

According to Wehmeyer (2003), self-determination is a broad concept that must be promoted by providing individuals with opportunities to both learn about self-determination and then to feel empowered to act in self-determined ways. In other words, we can only promote the possibility of an individual being self-determined by creating contexts in which the individual learns and uses behaviors associated with self-determination. Facilitating this process for individuals with intellectual disabilities presents some unique challenges for educators, because self-determination skills are often associated with specific intellectual and verbal language skills. Moreover, individuals with intellectual disabilities may need more specific and direct experiences related to self-determination in order to connect them with feelings of empowerment. Simply talking about self-determination is likely to be very ineffective and far too abstract for many individuals, especially those with intellectual disabilities. For these reasons, we believe that projects such as the one described in the next section can be useful for educators working with students who have intellectual disabilities.

The Movie Project

The movie project involved two individuals with intellectual disabilities (Joe and Carrie) who were interested in creating a movie for the local annual disability film festival. The first author, John, is a part-time videographer who works with individuals with intellectual disabilities. The goal of the movie project was to create a situation in

which self-determination could be explored as a theme within the movie, while using self-determination skills in the process of making the movie. Over a one-year period, John, Joe, and Carrie created a movie that was presented

at the local disability film festival, the TASH International conference, and various school presentations. Figure 2 provides a synopsis of the movie that was created.

Table 1: Elements of Self-Determination (adapted from Paraschiv, 2000)

Self-realization, self-understanding and self-awareness
Knowledge of strengths and weaknesses
Responsibility, * Taking care of yourself, Taking risks
Setting, planning, and achieving goals*; Determining what is important*; Decision-Making*
Internal locus of control; Choice making*; Self-Advocacy*
Problem solving *; Evaluating outcomes; Adjusting performance
Communicating and listening *; Negotiating and Assertiveness *; Dealing with conflict and criticism*
Autonomous behavior; Personal control
Self-regulation
Authority and Leadership
Freedom
Support

* Elements that were incorporated into the movie project.

Self-Determination Skills

Because the primary goal of the movie project was to both learn about and experience self-determination skills, we present some of the ways in which self-determination skills were infused throughout the project. Each of these elements are taken from Table 1.

During the initial discussions between John, Carrie, and Joe, as they worked to identify the “story” for the movie, Carrie and Joe had to articulate why certain scenes were important and how those scenes would be filmed (i.e., self-advocacy, communicating, and listening skills). Because it would have been impossible to film every story idea, the group had to negotiate and make decisions about what to film and what to drop (i.e., choice making and determining what is important). Additionally, the filming process necessitated use of a range of skills, such as asking for

people to play a role in the movie (i.e., seeking support), asking for permission to film in certain locations (i.e., problem-solving and communicating), and arranging meetings with each other (i.e., responsibility, setting, planning, and achieving goals). Once the movie was complete, Carrie and Joe had further opportunities to use self-determination skills during public presentations. These presentations required planning, public speaking, and responding to questions (i.e., leadership, assertiveness, and communicating and listening).

Ideas for Teachers

In thinking back on the movie project, we believe there are many ways in which teachers could implement a movie project with a focus on promoting student self-determination across the age range. Although our project is more ideally suited for middle

and high school students, the idea of using a movie project to focus on self-determination

can be appropriate for younger students as well.

Figure 2: Film Synopsis

The movie opens with a van pulling into a gas station and an attendant, Joe (played by himself), greets the driver. Joe fills up the van's tank and accepts a credit card for payment. The van pulls away and Joe's boss comes up to him and thanks him for the good work he does around the station and gives Joe his paycheck. Joe then walks to an ATM machine, deposits his paycheck and gets money out. He enters a store and buys a soda and walks home. At home, Joe shows a friend a university folder. The friend is unsure of Joe's intent and asks if he wants to go to a basketball game. Joe shrugs and gets his electronic communication device and types in "sign language classroom". His friend asks Joe if he wants to take a sign language class at the local university. Joe says "yes".

The two leave and Joe enters the College of Education to get information on the classes. He approaches a woman at a desk and he uses his communication device to state a preprogrammed question about sign language classes. The woman gives Joe a catalog and an application. Joe leaves and goes over the catalog with his friend. Joe figures out how to fit the class in his schedule.

Dr. Determined, a professor with Down syndrome (played by Carrie), talks to another professor about being nervous teaching her first day of class. The professor assures her she will do great job and to just keep in mind why she wanted to be a teacher. Dr. Determined explains that she wants to help students express themselves and achieve their life goals. The professor tells her to keep that in focus and that she would do great. Dr. Determined thanks him and leaves his office.

Joe enters the sign language class and introduces himself to his classmates. Dr. Determined walks in and signs in front of the class. The students are all puzzled and do not understand what Dr. Determined is trying to say. Dr. Determined speaks what she signed and introduces herself. The class then introduces themselves. Dr. Determined then teaches the students three very important signs, "no", "yes" and "I want".

Joe goes to a Halloween dance and looks around for someone. In the hallway he sees Debra who is signing with another woman. Joe goes up to Debra and introduces himself in sign and asks her, "I want to dance with you, please." Debra signs, "yes" and they hold hands and enter the dance.

At the time of our project, creating a movie was certainly a complex endeavor. However, home video production has expanded greatly in recent years with the advent of inexpensive cameras, computer editing software, and distribution outlets like DVDs and the internet. Home movie websites like Youtube.com are extremely popular and allow anyone to show a movie they make to anyone with internet access. These trends have made it very easy for a classroom with modern computer equipment to make a movie with webcams and easily obtainable free editing software (e.g., imovie for OS X, Windows Free Media Editor, Virtual dub or others for Windows). Although the technical aspects of

making a movie are beyond the scope of this paper, there are many resources available to teachers, such as the internet, books and magazines, and very likely, fellow teachers and students. A few websites with some excellent resources for teachers and students are included in Figure 4.

There are an endless number of ideas that can be examined. However, students must take ownership of the project to make it the most meaningful. Younger students or students with more limited skills can simply film things that are of interest to them or in response to a specific question posed by the teacher or class. For example, "What things are important in your life?", "Who are impor-

tant people in your life?”, “What kinds of jobs would you like to have?” The teacher can further structure the lesson around questions like “Why is that important to you?”, “What would you need to do to get a (friend, object, job, happiness, etc.)?” Another simple idea, especially for older students (middle and secondary), is to make a newscast. This can be done like the six o’clock news where students sit behind a desk and discuss issues related to self-determination. It can also be done in an interview style where students interview others about self-determination or any other important topic. Another great idea is to have the students make a documentary about an issue that is facing their class, school, or community. The student can identify the issue and then make a plan to solve it. An example might be to highlight a tutor where students can go to get the extra help they need. Much of this can be hypothetical, but it would be a great lesson not only in self-advocacy, but advocacy in general, if they can highlight and

tackle a real issue. A teacher must of course, take into account their students’ ages, strengths and needs, but the documentary or newscast formula can be used with students of any ability, especially if done with a group of students with different skills. Ideally, a movie project should also involve fellow students who do not have disabilities. Such projects can provide important cooperative learning opportunities in which students possess different skills, allowing the teacher to take a less directive role.

A narrative film, that is a movie with a script and actors, can be very exciting to make and show. One thing that makes the narrative film particularly interesting is that anything is possible and the students can pretend to be whatever they want. In our movie, Joe portrays a gas station attendant and Carrie portrays a college professor, which when viewed by others, can be imagined as real possibilities.

Figure 3: Guidelines for Movie Project

- Does our movie show us finding and using our voice to change something in our lives that we feel is important?
- Does our movie show us acquiring information about a cause, idea, or policy that affects us?
- Does our movie show us promoting or supporting a cause, idea, or policy that affects us?
- Does our movie preserve our dignity and self-respect?
- Does our movie project preserve the dignity and respect of others?
- Does our movie demonstrate self-determination and self-advocacy?

Implementing a Movie Project

For teachers interested in implementing a movie project, we found that here are three distinct components that are critical to keep in mind. Each component was directly

tied to an important aspect of self-determination, as mentioned above:

- Creation of a set of guidelines
- Facilitation of discussions to promote problem-solving

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- Presentation opportunities

Establish a set of specific guidelines

The process of creating a movie was new for each participant, so the initial stage involved exploration of what the movie would be about. However, early on, it became clear that a guideline was important to keep everyone focused on the purpose of the movie, which was to depict concepts related to self-determination (such as career exploration, problem-solving, communicating, and making choices). Obviously, the guideline was more for John as he evaluated the ideas presented by Joe and Carrie, because John's goal was to use the initial discussions as a lesson on self-advocacy and self-determination. The guideline (see Figure 3) is a set of questions that John used during discussions with Joe and Carrie to constantly bring their focus on essential self-determination concepts. Teachers wanting to do a movie project should carefully consider what the guiding questions of the project should be, if they want to use the movie making process for a specific purpose. Since our movie project was focused on self-determination, the guiding questions reflect that focus. In other words, if someone came up with an idea for the movie that did not adhere to the specific focus stated in the guidelines, the idea had to either be modified or discarded.

Movie projects can range from very complex to very simple. And, as the project progresses, it is possible to lose sight of the purpose. It is important to remember that the project is a process and that the final project is simply a vehicle for practicing critical skills. For the educators and adult facilitators, it is important to keep in mind that dialoguing, negotiating, and creating should be the

goal of every exchange, with less emphasis on coming to quick solutions to issues that arise. Although the topic of the movie can certainly vary, we believe focusing the movie on enacting skills associated with self-determination and self-advocacy can be particularly effective. For example, in our movie project, Joe and Carrie, had the opportunity to enact a career choice (Joe wanted to play a gas station attendant; Carrie wanted to play a sign language instructor). In addition, Joe had the opportunity to portray problem-solving skills within the movie as he tried to figure out how he was going to ask a special person to dance. He also demonstrates self-determination skills when he uses the ATM machine in order to get money to purchase a coke.

Facilitate discussion

When developing the story line for the movie project, it is important that teachers listen to and consider the students' suggestions. Brainstorming ideas helps students to experience some of components of self-determination, such as negotiating, communicating, and listening. The completion of the project is a way to further enhance students' knowledge about self-determination and to work on a variety of self-advocacy skills. During the initial phase, the teacher should introduce the students to self-determination and provide scenarios that demonstrate the concept. The teacher can have the students act out short prewritten scenarios (either written by the teacher or obtained commercially) or just discuss ideas. As the students begin to get involved in the discussion, the teacher can facilitate and have the student expand on their ideas. One great question to ask is "How does that idea relate to self-determination?" or alternatively, for younger students, "How does that idea relate to you having control or

choice?” Another good pertinent question is “Is that an appropriate way to act?” During this idea phase it is important that the teacher distinguishes between appropriate and inappropriate instances of self-advocacy. For instance, telling a teacher “I’m not going to do the homework” is not appropriate, but telling the teacher “the homework is difficult for me and I may need help” is appropriate.

Once the class, in groups or the class as a whole, has come up with a good idea for the movie, the students must plan how to make it. This phase can help teach and practice many important skills. Job duties such as director, actors, set designers must be decided on. During this phase the students may also make a list of other people to collaborate with, such as students from a media class, drama class, etc. The students can be respon-

sible to connect with these people and make sure that they are sufficiently prepared to explain the project to prospective collaborators. They would then have to explain why the project is important to them and why the project will be important for the collaborators.

Present the final movie to an audience with question and answer opportunities

Once the movie is completed, it is rewarding and beneficial to show it to an audience of people with and without disabilities. After the presentation, a discussion can help the audience understand what they saw, and it can help the students practice some of their skills. This will give students the opportunity to generalize some of the self-determination skills that they learned during the movie making process.

Figure 4: Internet Resources for Teachers

Teacher’s Guide to Making Student Movies	http://content.scholastic.com/browse/article.jsp?id=6758
Digital Storytelling	http://www.kenton.k12.ky.us/DigitalStory/dstindex.htm
Kids’ Vids	http://kidsvid.altec.org/index.html
About Video Editing	http://www.aboutvideoediting.com

Concluding Thoughts

Creating a movie based on stories generated by students with disabilities is an example of project-based learning which also incorporates the principles outlined by Wehmeyer and colleagues (Wehmeyer, Abery, Mithaug, & Stancliffe, 2003; Wehmeyer & Field, 2007), referred to as the *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction* (Wehmeyer, Palmer, Agran, Mithaug, & Mar-

tin, 2000). The *Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction* has been developed specifically for students with intellectual disabilities, and is an important guide for educators seeking to promote learning experiences with the goal of self-determination skills development.

Agran (2006) noted the importance of a “say-do” correspondence and the importance of educators providing opportunities in

which students use behaviors associated with being a self-determined individual. What is clear is that educators and parents can best promote the development of self-determination by providing a range of authentic opportunities in which students with disabilities learn about self-determination while using and applying the skills. Projects like the movie project described in this article is one way educators can provide such an experience for students who have intellectual disabilities.

Rather than teach about self-determination behaviors and skills in isolation, we believe it is important to promote self-determination through planned activities in which students problem-solve, create, negotiate, and explain their ideas. Too often, educators may teach component skills, hoping that the student will then be able to put them all together and then use them in real situations. However, becoming a self-determined individual is a continuously evolving endeavor that should not be tied to prerequisite skills. As Wehmeyer, Bersani, and Gagne (2000) note:

It is important to continue to emphasize that there is a reciprocal nature to providing opportunities to take control over one's life (be it chairing an educational planning meeting, deciding one's own educational goals, or choosing one's own service provider) and the increased capacity to take control. That is, we must never confuse the importance of developing and enhancing skills with the need to move ahead and turn over power and control to people with disabilities. A skills development approach is not equivalent to a flow-through model in which a person is not allowed to take control until he or she has a prerequisite set of

skills. Instead, it is through the interaction of capacity building, opportunities to exercise choice and control, and provision of supports that the goal of enabling people to achieve self-determination is accomplished. (p. 113)

Although we are not able to determine whether the skills learned from the movie project generalized for Joe and Carrie, we have observed them during their presentations and seen the reactions of their audience. Joe, in fact, has continued to ask about making another movie and went on to actually self-advocate to have his own ATM card. He also continues to ask about a job working with cars, and recently signed up to take an auto mechanic class. Exploring career options is one aspect of this project that we did not foresee, and has turned out to be an important component.

We believe that movie projects can set the stage for a variety of self-determined behaviors tied to direct experiences of empowerment. It will, however, take talented and willing educators who see the value of facilitating a process, keeping the vision of self-determination as the primary goal. With this vision in mind, educators can hopefully allow students to take risks with their projects and continuously facilitate and encourage them on their journey towards a more self-determined life.

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