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Customer Service Skill Development for Students With Autism Spectrum Disorder Using Video Modeling

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Abstract

Preparing secondary students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD) for a variety of potential professions is important to enhance their postsecondary employment outcomes. This article provides step-by-step guidelines for practitioners to use video modeling interventions to develop the customer service skills of students with ASD who are employed or participating in employment experiences in their communities. Video modeling is an evidence-based practice for learners with ASD that can be used as a viable workplace support.

Keywords

ASD, community instruction, employment, video modeling

Ms. Taylor is a special education teacher in her district's 18-21 community-based employment program who works with students with autism spectrum disorder (ASD). The district has developed positive relationships with local businesses to provide authentic employment experiences for secondary students. For example, her students rotate through four internships in one school year based on their strengths and interests. Ms. Taylor, job coaches, and employers adopt a collaborative approach in meeting students' employment needs. Evidence-based practices (EBPs) for students with ASD are implemented at the job sites to develop social and employability skills to support successful transition to adulthood. She plans to implement video modeling (VM) procedures in community employment settings to support the customer service skill acquisition of her students with ASD.

Students who participate in employment experiences while still in high school have improved outcomes in education, employment, and independent living (Test et al., 2009). On-the-job instruction in community settings can lead to competitive employment at the time of graduation (White & Weiner, 2004). Educators who facilitate community-based work programs need to implement a variety of EBPs for students with ASD to meet their complex needs while at work (Hendricks, 2010). Related service providers and stakeholders, such as employment specialists, vocational rehabilitation counselors, administrators, job coaches, employers, and other community members, can benefit from developing knowledge about how to support the early work experiences of students with ASD.

Video Modeling as an Employment Support

VM is an EBP for students with ASD with a relatively large literature base supporting its efficacy (Wong et al., 2015). This methodology involves the student watching a video of a target skill and imitating that skill immediately after viewing the video or at a later point in time (Bellini & Akullian, 2007). VM combines visually cued instruction with modeling to promote generalization of skills learned to a variety of setting and has been used to develop social initiations (Buggey, Hoomes, Sherberger, & Williams, 2011), academic skills (Kellems et al., 2016), daily living skills (Cannella-Malone et al., 2011; Kellems, Frandsen, Cardon, Knight, & Andersen, 2018; Kellems, Rickard, Okray, Sauer-Sagiv, & Washburn, 2017), vocational skills (Kellems & Morningstar, 2012), and transitional behaviors (Cihak, Fahrenkrog, Ayres, & Smith, 2010) for students with ASD.

VM is a recognized EBP for individuals with ASD (Wong et al., 2015), and implementing it in community employment settings may be an effective workplace support. For example, Kellems and Morningstar (2012) used an iPod to teach tasks to young adults with ASD working at

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bowling alleys, community centers, and other businesses. Goh and Bambara (2013) used a camcorder to film video self-models to teach three adults with intellectual disabilities chained job tasks. In addition, VM and prompting was delivered via a tablet to help young adults with ASD complete a multistep shipping task (Burke et al., 2013). These studies highlight the versatility of VM and its application in applied settings, yet all focus on job task acquisition rather than social skills at work.

Customer Service Skills of Employees With Autism Spectrum Disorder

Developing customer service skills of employees with ASD is a likely workplace support considering a primary manifestation of ASD is social and communication support needs (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). Some people may assume individuals with ASD are not well-suited for customer service positions or would prefer working alone. On the contrary, individuals with ASD can be employed across a broad range of professions, including jobs that require direct interaction with customers (Hagner & Cooney, 2005). Therefore, professionals must be diligent to not stereotype or underestimate the possible employment outcomes of individuals with ASD. Utilizing existing EBPs for individuals with ASD, such as VM, can support acquisition of socially relevant skills in diverse employment settings.

Adolescents and adults with ASD report one of the most challenging employment barriers to navigate is social interactions with others, such as customers (Müller, Schuler, Burton, & Yates, 2003). One simple way to develop customer service skills is to teach verbalization of specific customer service phrases. VM has been utilized to increase verbal repertoires of children with ASD (Plavnick & Ferreri, 2011) and complex social sequences (Nikopoulos & Keenan, 2007). Although much of the VM social and communication research has taken place in school and clinical settings, as students with ASD graduate and join the workforce or pursue postsecondary education, it will become increasingly important to implement interventions in postschool settings. Therefore, this article will provide guidelines on how to implement VM specifically to develop customer service skills of individuals with ASD working in their local communities.

Hank is a student enrolled in Ms. Taylor's 18-21 work program who has expressed an interest in working at a café located near his school that serves sandwiches, soups, and coffee. Students who have worked there report the owner, Mr. Lewis, is flexible and accommodating but also has high expectations for all employees. Job duties include greeting customers, preparing food, operating the cash register, and delivering food to tables. Mr. Lewis would like for Hank to work the cash register. Hank has prior experience with cash registers and strong math computation skills, therefore, this position appears to be a good fit for Hank. Identified areas of support needs for Hank include interacting with the customers appropriately and positively. For example, Hank can perseverate on his own interest areas and say mildly inappropriate comments to customers. Ms. Taylor and Mr. Lewis believe Hank could benefit from direct instruction in customer service skills while working the cash register. Mr. Lewis is agreeable to the VM intervention and potentially using the videos with other employees as well.

Types of Video Modeling

Several types of VM can be used for individuals with ASD, all of which involve observational learning and behavioral modeling (Bandura, 1986). When selecting which type of VM to use, practitioners must take into account the duration of the videos, complexity of the target skill, and individual learner characteristics. *Traditional VM* is perhaps the most common type of VM and involves someone other than the learner performing the target skill (Bellini & Akullian, 2007). The model can be anyone who is able to successfully complete the skill. In an employment setting, the model may be a coworker with similar job duties as the student with ASD, supervisor, or a fellow classmate. *Video self-modeling* is when learners are shown only their positive performance on a targeted skill (Buggey, 2005). Some individuals with ASD may find viewing themselves in a video to be motivating and reinforcing. If the student is not yet able to perform the skill in its entirety, then video clips can be edited together to form one succinct video.

In *point-of-view VM*, the target skill is filmed from the perspective of the learner, only showing the salient features of the skill. The scene is typically filmed at eye level and shows what the individual sees within the context of the targeted skill or activity (Tetreault & Lerman, 2010). For example, hands can move to demonstrate the movement to operate a cash register or how to prepare a sandwich. For interacting with customers, a point-of-view video may show only the faces of customers. Finally, *video prompting* (VP) is one of the most widely used forms of VM. Similarly to VM, VP uses videos to model desired behavior or tasks (Kellems et al., 2015); however, with VP, the task is divided into smaller segments. The learner views one segment at a time, then completes the part of the behavior shown. After watching and completing the first stem, the learner will then watch and imitate the subsequent step, then the third, and so on. VP is an effective intervention for students who may have trouble remembering multiple steps at a time.

All types of VM have some studies demonstrating their efficacy. Therefore, individual needs and the employment setting must be taken into consideration when selecting the type of VM. For example, VP may be best suited for longer, more complex tasks while traditional VM may be best suited for shorter tasks. Whatever mode of VM is chosen,

Table 1. VM Steps to Implement in Community Employment Settings.

VM steps
Step 1: Define job-specific expectations
Step 2: Conduct on-the-job task analyses
Step 3: Select and define target skill
Step 4: Advance planning for video production
a. Obtain consent to film
b. Select technology
c. Develop scripts
Step 5: Film and edit videos
Step 6: Implement the video modeling intervention
Step 7: Progress monitoring and treatment integrity
Step 8: Evaluate intervention effects

Note. VM = video modeling.

note the flexibility and adaptability of VM. For example, different types of VM can be utilized in the same video (e.g., a self-modeling video that cuts to point of view). Secondary students may take an active role in the video production and express a preference for type of video that will be most helpful to them. Similarly, once a video is produced, a student may interact with the video in a different way than originally anticipated (e.g., traditional VM paused between steps to become VP). Finally, professionals may consider creating a video library to use with multiple students at different job sites.

Steps to Implement Video Modeling in Employment Settings

The steps below are similar to other published VM guides and resources (e.g., Banda, Matuszny, & Turkan, 2007; Delano, 2007; McCoy & Hermansen, 2007) although the context of VM is specific to adolescents and young adults with ASD who are working at jobs or participating in employment experiences that require customer service skills. See Table 1 for an overview of the steps.

Step 1: Define Job-Specific Expectations

The practitioner should collaborate with the employer to define specific job expectations that are applicable not only to the employee with ASD but also to the employees without disabilities. Both informal interviews with the employer and in vivo behavioral observations should be conducted. In the informal interviews, ask questions such as, "Do you expect the employee to greet customers?" and "What specific customer service phrases would you like for your employees to say?" In vivo observations of the employment setting in general and employee specifically will yield valuable information. For example, a student working at a clothing store may excel at basic job tasks (e.g., folding clothes, pricing items) but may need direct instruction to appropriately interact with customers. The practitioner would most likely not be aware of job-specific norms and expectations until directly observing in the employment setting.

Step 2: Conduct On-the-Job Task Analyses

Using the job-specific expectations, the student should be observed performing the job tasks required for the specific position. The job tasks should be broken down into discrete steps to create a task analysis. The sequence of behaviors an individual demonstrates to perform a task may be different from another individual performing the same task (Cooper, Heron, & Heward, 2007). Therefore, the on-the-job task analyses can be used to assess which steps the student can perform satisfactorily and which steps do not meet employer expectations. The practitioner should develop the task analysis in collaboration with the employer and mark + or – for every step the employee performs or does not perform correctly or adequately. The job-specific task analysis will guide video production.

Step 3: Select and Define Target Skill

Based on the results of the task analysis, the target skill selected for the VM intervention must be operationalized. For example, if the task analysis revealed the student looks toward the door when a customer enters but does not verbalize a specific customer service phrase (e.g., "Welcome to [store name]!"), the target skill may be to say a greeting phrase every time a customer enters the store. Employment skills, and particularly those focused on social skill acquisition, can be nuanced and complex. For example, saying "Welcome to [store name]!" should be said audibly and clearly while also an appropriate distance from the incoming customer (e.g., approximately arm's length distance). Job-specific skills targeted for the VM intervention must be clearly defined so all stakeholders understand the purpose of the video.

Step 4: Advance Planning for Video Production

Obtain consent to film. The ideal location for filming is the actual environment in which the target skill will occur. Therefore, consent must be obtained from the business owner or employer of the job site. Citizens in the local community in the employment setting should not be filmed. The employee with ASD and video model, if being utilized, must give consent before being filmed. How the videos will be stored during and after the VM intervention should be clearly described in the consent process. Consider asking for consent to store the videos for future use with other students. If individuals decline to be filmed, respect their wishes and ask other individuals to participate or consider

Table 2. Sample VM Script.

Sample customer service VM script
Type of VM: Traditional VM with a coworker as a peer model
First scene: Narrator standing outside the café.
Narrator: When a customer approaches the register, you should look the customer in the eye, smile, and give a greeting phrase. Say, "Welcome to [café name]!" or "How are you today?" When the customer responds, you should then give a customer service phrase. You can say, "May I take your order?" or "What can I get for you today?" After the customer has finished ordering, you can say, "Enjoy your meal!" or "Thank you for coming in today!" Watch the following video so you can do the same.
Second scene: Customer approaches the café register with peer model behind the register.
Peer model: **"Welcome to [café name]! How are you doing today?"**
Customer: "I'm good, thank you!"
Peer model: **"May I take your order?"**
Customer: "I'd like tomato soup and grilled cheese.
Peer model: **"Anything else?"**
Customer: "No, that's it."
Peer model: "That will be $9.50."
Customer: "Here you go." (pays)
Peer model: **"Great, thank you. Enjoy your meal!"**
Third scene: Customer walks away to wait for food. Peer model greets next customer waiting in line.

Note. VM = video modeling.

non-video-based interventions for learners with ASD.

Select technology. Devices used to film VM videos vary in expense and ease of use. Traditional VM may be replaced by portable VM due to the ease of mobile devices. Videos can be filmed using a digital camcorder, GoPro, tablet, or even a smart phone. Both iOS Apple and Android smart phone devices can be used. Selected technology should be prepared in advance and practiced until comfortable using. The device should be fully charged and/or batteries checked before filming. Consider using a tripod for steady shooting.

Develop scripts. Develop scripts and a plan for filming. Include details such as the type of VM selected, words the video models will say, and specific shots to film. Consider in advance how the video will be edited and which shots are needed for the final video(s). Write the scripts and share with the video models if using traditional VM or point-of-view VM. If using self-modeling, develop the scripts in conjunction with the student with ASD so he or she will be successful during filming. See Table 2 for a sample script.

Ms. Taylor and Mr. Lewis decide traditional VM would be most appropriate for Hank. They approach a coworker, Craig, with similar job duties as Hank and ask whether he is willing to be filmed. Mr. Lewis explains the purpose of the VM intervention is to assist Hank with his customer service skills while working the cash register. Craig agrees and signs a consent form. Ms. Taylor selects a tablet (e.g., iPad®) as the device to film and iMovie® as the editing software because she feels comfortable with both. Ms. Taylor and Mr. Lewis write the script together before filming. Craig will be filmed saying these target phrases: "Welcome to [café name]!" "May I take your order?" and "Enjoy your meal!" Craig has the opportunity to practice the script and ask questions before filming. Another coworker expresses an interest in participating and agrees to serve as the confederate customer. The videos are scheduled to be filmed before the café opens so the employment setting will be quiet with no actual customers present.

Step 5: Film and Edit Videos

Video models should feel comfortable before filming. Film the planned scenes as written in the scripts. Focus only on the target skills and avoid filming extraneous scenes or sounds. Provide explicit direction and encouragement to the student with ASD if serving as a self-model. For self-modeling videos, shots may be edited to display only the target skill and filming can take place over several days if needed. If the video is filmed without errors, the editing process may be skipped. However, some editing will most likely enhance the video.

Upload the raw film footage from the recording device to a desktop or laptop. Some devices, such as iPads® and some Android tablets, allow us to film and edit the footage on the same device. Like operating systems tend to be more compatible with one another than different operating systems (e.g., Macs with Macs and personal computers [PCs] with PCs). If footage was shot using a digital camcorder, Windows Movie Maker is a logical choice. GoPro footage can automatically be paired with the GoPro application. If footage was shot using an iOS Apple device, then iMovie® is commonly used. Consider adding text and voice-over to enrich the video content and overall quality. In addition, carefully consider the length of the video. Shorter videos or even clips (i.e., VP) are recommended over lengthy videos.

Step 6: Implement the VM Intervention

The final edited video should be loaded to a device, such as an iPod, laptop, desktop, or even a web-based mode such as YouTube or DropBox. Web-based applications allow videos to be played from the cloud and are accessible from any device with Internet access. In addition to playback mode, consider how many times the student will view the video and latency between viewing the video and performing the target skill. In the VM literature, individuals typically viewed the video one time before provided with the opportunity to perform the target skill (Wong et al., 2015).

However, participants in other studies viewed the video two (Charlop-Christy & Daneshvar, 2003) or three (Sherer et al., 2001) times before target skill performance. The student's needs and current level of work performance should be taken into consideration when determining how many times the video should be viewed. Regarding latency, the general recommendation is the individual should have the opportunity to perform the target skill immediately after viewing the video. In an employment setting, consider having the student watch the video upon first arriving at work, which is also referred to as video priming. The video could also be strategically viewed during the work shift in any of the following situations: (a) immediately before demonstration of targeted skill, (b) on a predetermined schedule (e.g., every 30 min, once an hour), or (c) as a correction procedure if the targeted skill is performed incorrectly. One variable to consider is self-operation of the device by the student. If possible, teach the student how to operate the device and access the videos. This will provide flexibility and give students the freedom to treat the videos as on-demand instruction.

Step 7: Progress Monitoring and Treatment Integrity

Ways to measure the behavior vary depending on the target skill. For example, if the target skill is to increase use of customer service phrases, a measure based on repeatability such as frequency count (Cooper et al., 2007) would be most appropriate. Each occasion that a customer enters the store or approaches the register could serve as an opportunity to verbalize the specific customer service phrases. Phrases can be marked + or – based on their use or nonuse. If the target skill is to increase time-on-task, a time sampling data collection procedure (Cooper et al., 2007) could be appropriate. The practitioner can observe at specific intervals (e.g., 30 s, 1 min) and mark + for on-task or – for off-task. See Vollmer, Sloman, and Pipkin (2008) for more details and a practical guide to data collection systems and treatment integrity monitoring. A procedural fidelity checklist must be developed to ensure the VM intervention is implemented as planned (see Table 3). Collect baseline data for a minimum of three to five sessions and until stable baseline responding is present. A shorter baseline may be considered if the employer is dissatisfied with job performance or the student is in danger of job termination for any reason. Upon implementation of the VM intervention, continue data collection to capture the student's responding. Use the data to guide day-to-day decisions about the efficacy of the VM intervention.

Step 8: Evaluate Intervention Effects

A performance criterion must be established in collaboration with the employer. The student's work performance should be graphed regularly to determine the effectiveness of the VM intervention. See Barton and Reichow's (2012) guidelines for creating single-subject graphs using Microsoft Office® software. Evaluate the effects of the VM intervention by visual analysis of the baseline and intervention data (Barton, Lloyd, Spriggs, & Gast, 2018). If an immediate change in responding is observed when the VM intervention is applied to the target skill, then visual analysis of the data suggests an effective intervention. Continue to implement the VM intervention and collect data for additional replications to demonstrate effectiveness of the intervention. If visual analysis reveals the VM intervention does not enhance the customer service skills of the student with ASD as operationally defined, consider any of the following courses of action: (a) supplement the VM intervention with another EBP for learners with ASD, (b) vary the implementation of the videos (e.g., view additional times), (c) refilm the videos using a different VM type, or (d) select a different EBP for learners with ASD.

Ms. Taylor and Mr. Lewis film the videos over three days using an iPad®. Ms. Taylor edits the videos using iMovie®. Three videos are produced, one for each customer service phrase Hank will say. She begins baseline data collection on Hank's use of the three customer service phrases while working the cash register. During baseline, she utilizes a frequency count data collection system to count the number of greeting, service, and closing phrases verbalized during each available opportunity (i.e., customer approaches the cash register to order). She sits at a table near the cash register where she can hear Hank but not interfere with his interactions with customers. After five days of baseline data with stable responding, she implements the first video with Hank targeting the greeting phrase, "Welcome to [café name]!" Hank views the video at the beginning of his work shift on the iPad® and immediately begins saying the greeting phrase to customers. The second and third videos are implemented in the same systematic manner with support from Mr. Lewis as well. After 20 work sessions, Hank is consistently saying all three customer service phrases to customers. Mr. Lewis is pleased with Hank's progress and requests for other employees to also use the videos.

Conclusion

Interpersonal and social skills are required for almost every profession. Students with ASD can benefit from explicit instruction in customer service skills provided via VM interventions. Innovative technologies can promote generalization of skills learned to authentic settings and break down barriers (Goodwin, 2008), such as those typically experienced by individuals with ASD regarding employment. By following the steps presented in this article, practitioners can promote integrated employment experiences for students with ASD in their communities using evidence-based instructional strategies. As

Table 3. Sample VM Procedural Fidelity Checklist.

Sample customer service VM procedural fidelity checklist		
1. Practitioner asks employee to watch video in a quiet location (e.g., staff break room). Sample phrase to say: "Will you come with me to watch an instructional video about customer service skills?"	☐Yes	☐No
2. If employee agrees, practitioner and employee go to quiet location together. If employee refuses, practitioner will ask why and have conversation about individual's concerns and importance of customer service skills at work.	☐Yes	☐No
3. In the quiet location, practitioner selects the appropriate instructional video for the day from playback device (e.g., laptop, tablet, desktop).	☐Yes	☐No
4. The correct instructional video plays from playback device with sound that's loud enough for the employee to hear.	☐Yes	☐No
5. When video finishes playing, practitioner checks for understanding by asking, "What customer service phrase(s) will you say today?"	☐Yes	☐No
6. If the employee says the correct customer service phrase(s) for the day, practitioner will provide behavior-specific praise, such as "That's great! I like the way you said the greeting, service, and closing phrase." If employee cannot recall the correct customer service phase(s) for the day, practitioner will play the video again and say, "That's okay . . . let's watch the video again to see what customer service phrases you will say."	☐Yes	☐No
7. Practitioner gives option to employee to view video an additional time before data collection begins. Practitioner will say, "Would you like to watch the video one more time before going back to work?" Employee may choose to view the video again or decline.	☐Yes	☐No
8. Practitioner thanks the employee by saying, "Thanks for watching the instructional video! I'm excited to hear you say your customer service phrases today at work."	☐Yes	☐No

Note. VM = video modeling.

large numbers of secondary students with ASD graduate and join the workforce each year, it will become increasingly important to support their social skill development at work.

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