Chapter 8
ScreenPLAY:
An Interactive Video Learning
Resource for At-Risk Teens

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the various facets of screenPLAY, an interactive video intervention for at-risk teens, which presents social skills in a medium that is both familiar and motivating to this age group. The chapter begins with a discussion of the pedagogical ideas that motivated the creation of screenPLAY, from the necessity to move away from a skill-driven to a content-driven social-skill intervention, to promoting learning from experience, and then to the importance of clarifying learning objectives. In addition to the adoption of a constructivist perspective, a case is made for including cognitive and linguistic concomitants with social skill acquisition. A description is provided of how these additional two variables relate to behavior and the way they are integrated in the structure of the intervention. A cognitive skill is embedded in each of the eleven templates used to present content. Video clips displaying vignettes employing student actors are analyzed in a context that requires users to record their responses, thoughts, and observations in audio or text files that are uploaded to be accessed later by other users. The anonymity of both users and actors is protected, first, by the provision of an avatar to represent the user, and then, by having the video clips transformed into a comic book look. The technical details of the construction of this digital platform are provided, as well as a dialectic analyzing how the obstacles, encountered along the way, ultimately contributed to the overall innovative functionality. Future directions are examined in the context of screenPLAY’s modular structure that allows the addition of content and functionality.

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INTRODUCTION

screenPLAY is a web-based assessment-intervention tool that was designed specifically to teach skills associated with the successful management of social situations. Developed with the intention of capitalizing on the many features of technology that teens find attractive, screenPLAY engages them through new media and interactive gaming technologies which generate the type of experience that appeals so much to their generation. Using imaging that emulates graphic novels, digital games, and animation-enhanced movies – key entertainments and touchstones for this demographic – screenPLAY is instantly intriguing to them because it presents their peers (adolescents of their own age) in familiar situations that resonate with their sense of the world. Thus, while engaged and at play, they are also learning and building the skills which will have the potential to change their lives in ways beneficial to themselves, their families, their educators, and society in general. Our intention is that screenPLAY should represent an opportunity for the convergence of learning and pop culture, the purpose being to access a previously unreachable demographic.

In the school context, at-risk adolescents typically under-perform while manifesting a range of antisocial behaviors including aggressiveness, violence, various types of addiction, and untreated emotional problems. Not surprisingly, when these students frequently find the school experience unrelated to their reality they consequently disconnect and choose to leave. Lacking, as a consequence, both literacy and the employment skills required for legitimate job seeking, some are attracted to criminal behavior; others, succumbing to addiction, mental illness, or the burdens of parenthood at a very young age, become integrated into the social welfare system, where public institutions sustain them.

The creation of screenPLAY was motivated initially by a desire to develop a tool that would serve both as assessment and as intervention in a social curriculum for at-risk youth. Rejecting the “wait until they fail” (Kaufman, 1999) model, such a tool was expected to benefit both students and teachers because social skills, unlike other curricula taught in a classroom, are addressed incidentally only as part of an unintended curriculum. Typically, when an inappropriate situation occurs, perhaps it motivates attention that might take the form of a discussion, a story, or a movie. Usually, however, compliance is encouraged with the use of mild punishment – time out, loss of privileges, being sent to the office, and other methods. screenPLAY, then, would not only help teachers to present these skills in a systematic manner but would also generate data about the typical ways in which at-risk youth, or youth in general, deal with the many social demands placed on them in their varied social and educational contexts. With the addition of this social perspective to the classroom environment, learning to deal with other people, finding appropriate ways to have one’s personal needs met, and other such important proficiencies are addressed in a learning environment that is safe and wholesome.

The most central challenge in the social skills curriculum has involved the realization that no unique “scientifically based technology of behavior” exists (Kehle & Bray, 2004). On the other hand, many psychological theories abound, each with independent ways of explaining behavior; as a result, each promotes interventions consistent with the relevant interpretation. In educational settings, academic skills, such as literacy and numeracy, as well as subject-specific skills (e.g., science, history), have been studied and organized to generate pedagogical objectives. Social skills, however, have not; although an examination of social skills programs demonstrates that many are fashioned parallel to other academic curricula, they are skill-driven (Mathur & Rutherford, 1994) and as such, overlook that they are normally acquired implicitly, and usually target the behavior of young children. Finally, educators generally do not teach social skills explicitly (Kehle & Bray,
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