



Include Students in the Learning Process

SCRIPTING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS¹

Communication breakdowns can happen for a variety of reasons (e.g., emotional issues, speech and language disorders, ESL barriers). Additionally, students with LBLD may have pragmatic language deficits, which compromise their conversational skills and can impact them throughout their day both at home and in school. One highly effective strategy for addressing pragmatic language issues or other communication difficulties is **scripting**.

SCRIPTING

Scripting means providing the student with the exact words to use in a particular situation, taking into account the time and place. For example, perhaps a student has been talking about joining the baseball team. Rather than saying, “Talk to the baseball coach about your interest in joining the team,” you could say, “Go to the baseball coach’s office after school today. Tell him, ‘I would like to sign up for the baseball team. When are the tryouts?’” Another example is when asking a student to go to the class next door to borrow a marker from another teacher. Rather than saying, “Go borrow a marker from Mrs. Gross,” you could ask the student to go to Mrs. Gross’ classroom and say, “Excuse me. I’m sorry to interrupt. Can Mr. Jones borrow a whiteboard marker?” The key is to model very specific, concrete language. It may be helpful to write down the exact script for the student to reference.

STORY NARRATIVES

Story narratives can be viewed as an off-shoot of scripting. These “stories” are created using visuals and scripted language to help define behaviors for particular situations. A teacher may create a story narrative for a student to use at recess or a parent may develop one in preparation for attending a party. In order to understand story narratives, it is important to understand the concept of hidden curriculum. According to Lavoie (2005), hidden curriculum is “...a set of unwritten rules that demands compliance.” Myles, Trautman, and Schlevan’s book, *The Hidden Curriculum for Understanding Unstated Rules in Social Situations for Adolescents and Young Adults*, is a great practical resource, which provides expected behaviors for a variety of social situations (e.g., in the grocery store, on the bus).

Although story narratives are often used for students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD) to facilitate communication, they can certainly be adapted and used for any students working on communication skills.

¹ Adapted from writing by Linda Gross, M.A., CCC-SLP and conversations with Ariel Martin-Cone – Landmark School.



EXAMPLE SITUATIONS

PowerPoints

When a high school student was having difficulty with personal space, a speech-language pathologist created a PowerPoint story narrative with him. Each slide included both scripted language as well as visuals. They titled it, *Communicating with Other Kids: Knowing My Physical Boundaries*. One of the slides focused on the behaviors that were bothering her friends: **People will get annoyed if I do any of the following to get their attention: hit, kick, poke, slap, stand too close.** That was followed by a slide that provided alternative, more acceptable behavior: **These are things that I can do or say to let people know I want to hang out: Say their name; Say, “Hey, _____;” Make eye contact; etc.**

Scenarios

A high school student was having difficulty interacting with his peers in the dorm lounge; specifically related to watching the TV. In consultation with a speech-language pathologist, he and a teacher created four different story narratives to cover various scenarios that were possible in the lounge (e.g., I’m alone in the lounge watching TV, and then someone enters and wants to change the channel; I enter the lounge when someone is already there watching TV.) The following is one of these scripts the teacher and student created.

Situation: I’m alone in the lounge watching TV, and then someone enters.

I like to watch TV in the lounge. When I’m alone, I lay across the couch. When I’m alone, I can watch whatever channel I choose.

When someone else comes in, they might want to watch a different channel.

I will know this because they might say, “I don’t like this show!”

OR

They might take the remote and change the channel.

OR

They might say, “I want to watch _____.”

I could say:

“This show will be over in ___ minutes. Can we finish watching my show and then we can change the channel?”

OR

“I just started watching this show.”

OR

“_____” (Work with the student to create other possible dialogue.)



Notecards

For students with and without pragmatic disorders, helping them script key points for longer difficult conversations will allow them to be sure to address each point and assist them in moving past emotions to get at the issue. One student who was struggling in a math class met with his advisor to discuss options. They identified the issues, his related feelings, and the timeline of the events that led him to the difficult point. His advisor was able to detail a few key points with him, and he later wrote these down on notecards to bring to his meeting with his teacher.

This checklist of issues included such notes as:

- *It is difficult to find a time to meet that works for both of us.*
- *The explanations given in class are not addressing my confusion.*
- *When we had a substitute, I needed follow up on the work we did.*

By sticking to specific examples, focusing on his own experience and “I” statements, and having these notes written down, the student was better able to navigate the conversation without placing blame.

Through scripting, teachers and parents can help students find appropriate language and effectively self-advocate. Effective self-advocacy skills enhance a student’s feelings of confidence and control, even in challenging situations.

A FINAL NOTE

Although it is impossible to generate scripts for every situation a student might encounter, the goal is to teach a strategic approach that students can, eventually, generalize to similar situations. It is important to note that carryover and generalization require practice with problem solving skills, the ability to view other people’s perspectives, and specific techniques.

For further information, see the following references:

Gross, L. (2013). *Social communication skills*. Prides Crossing, MA: Landmark School Outreach Program.

Lavoie, R. D. (2005). *Mastering the hidden curriculum of school. It’s so much work to be your friend: Helping the child with learning disabilities find social success* (pp. 251-269). New York: Simon & Schuster.

Myles, B. S., Trautman, M., & Schelvan, R. L. (2013). *The hidden curriculum for understanding unstated rules in social situations for adolescents and young adults*. Shawnee Mission, KS: AAPC.

HOW DOES THIS INCLUDE STUDENTS?

- Students will learn to incorporate their concerns into the scenarios and build skills for dealing with difficult situations in the classroom and beyond.