

Assistive Technology Education for end-users: The PRISMA case

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Context

Centro Studi Prisma was founded in Belluno (Italy) in 1984 as an interdisciplinary association for information and research into technical and social aspects of independent living and social integration of people with disabilities. It is a cultural association composed of people from all over Italy who are professionally or personally engaged in the field of disability, most of them being disabled persons themselves. Based on an interdisciplinary approach, Centro Studi Prisma works to promote culture, information and knowledge concerning all aspects of rehabilitation, social integration and independent living. The underlying idea is that knowledge is the fundamental basis for helping to remove social, cultural and technical barriers that hinder full participation of disabled persons in society.

Pursuing the idea that disabled persons' daily experience with disability makes them the main actors in their social integration, Centro Studi Prisma has held training courses every summer since 1985: these were originally entitled "*Disability and Daily Life: Education Toward Independent Living*" and are now also called *first-level courses*. They are addressed to adults of various ages (including the elderly) with motor and other disabilities - heterogeneity is preferred. The courses are also addressed to personal assistants, who fully participate by attending the same programme (with the exception of group-work sessions, which they attend separately from disabled participants). Up to 1998, the first level course was attended by 274 persons with disabilities and 243 personal assistants from all over Italy and from abroad.

In 1988 the training programme was extended to include a *second-level course* entitled "*Disability and Society: Promotion of Independent Living*", in which the participants are encouraged to act as promoters of independent living in their communities. Before being admitted to this course, participants must have completed the *first level course*. Up to 1998, four editions were held, attended by 89 persons with disabilities and 75 personal assistants.

Both courses are entirely organised, directed and run by a team of experts who have disabilities themselves. Several teachers without disability were invited to join the staff in order to widen its areas of expertise.

The concept of autonomy is central to these courses and AT plays a key role. Independent living is viewed as a way of approaching life and coping actively with disability, on the understanding that nobody is fully independent, everyone depending in some way on others. Trainees are helped to gain awareness of the value of their personal experience, to practice rationalising it when solving daily

life problems, and possibly to make use of it for role modelling or peer-counselling for others with disabilities. The programme of the *first-level course* mostly focuses on *technical components* of AT education, however some *human* and *socio-economic* subjects are also dealt with. The *second-level course* focuses exclusively on *human* and *socio-economic* issues, addressing topics such as combating social prejudice towards disability and AT. On the whole, the courses provide comprehensive training on AT, help to shape users' attitudes towards taking control of their lives, and favour the exploitation of personal experience of disability for social growth.

Design and set-up

Planning

In 1998, Prisma held the fourteenth edition of the *first-level course* together with the tenth edition of the *second-level course*. A preliminary announcement was circulated at the beginning of the year containing information about general course objectives, the venue, the duration and dates. These aspects had been decided the previous summer at the conclusion of the previous edition.

In March, the Prisma staff met to plan the courses operationally and organise them. At that meeting a number of responsibilities were assigned: appointments included a *course co-ordinator* (director), *teaching staff* (four experts), five *group work co-ordinators*, an *organisational manager* and the *secretariat*. A final programme was worked out, practicalities were defined, and deadlines for the launching stage were established.

The chosen location was a holiday resort in the Dolomite Mountains lying 1,200 metres above sea level; this resort is fully accessible to people with disabilities but open to the general public. The venue was the same used for previous editions, since it had proved highly satisfactory in terms of general comfort, overall accessibility, lodging and bathroom accessibility, aesthetics and seating arrangements, as well as being set in a fresh and healthy location. Favourable accommodation rates were negotiated, and an individual registration fee for trainees was fixed in order to cover some of the costs of the course.

Publicity

The courses were widely publicised by means of leaflets (sent out to the addresses contained in the Prisma database), articles in specialised journals, announcements on local television, and, for the second-level course, by contacting those who participated in previous editions of level one. Leaflets were also sent out to voluntary organisations, technical aids information centres, rehabilitation centres, as well as being handed out at congresses and exhibitions. Information was also spread by word of mouth.

Trainee Selection

As the courses were aimed at a very specific *target* and had well-defined *learning objectives*, it was important to ensure the participation of suitable trainees. A selection procedure was established and a person internally referred to as the *filter*

was appointed to implement it. The *filter* interviewed candidates over the phone and filled-in a confidential form divided into two parts, one for general information on the candidate and the other for the compiler's notes. The *filter*'s main tasks were to:

1. collect essential information on the candidate (disabilities, life context, autonomy etc);
2. provide the candidate with as much information as possible on the course;
3. understand the candidate's motivations for attending the course;
4. verify that the candidate had read the programme carefully and had understood that the course was residential;
5. give accommodation details and find out whether the candidate was willing to room with others;
6. explain that the organisers were unable to offer personal assistance during the course, so candidates had to bring their personal assistant if needed;
7. find out any special practical needs the participant may have, including possible medical needs requiring health facilities available at easy reach.

The *filter* sought to talk personally with each candidate. However, this was not possible in all cases because some candidates with severe communication problems could not manage a phone conversation. Consequently, it was sometimes necessary to talk with relatives, assistants, or even rehabilitation professionals who had proposed the course to their clients.

The information collected during this phase was essential not only for admitting participants, but also for other purposes, including:

1. logistic organisation - accommodating for the various levels of independence, mobility problems, specific needs, habits, difficulties, accompanying persons;
2. composition of work groups - established before the start of the course so as to separate persons with disabilities from personal assistants, and make each group as heterogeneous as possible in terms of age, geographic origin, pathology and disablement;
3. adjustment of teaching contents and style in response to the participants' cultural background and level of autonomy.

At the end of the selection process, 26 persons with disabilities and 27 personal assistants were recruited for the two courses. Their ages ranged from 18 to 75, the average being forty. The disabilities originated from a wide variety of pathologies, some of them progressive. Some persons also had verbal communication impairments.

The programme

First Level Course		Programme	
		<i>session</i>	<i>Topic</i>
Sunday 26/7/98	Afternoon	arrival / accommodation	
	Evening	Welcome session	· Introduction to the course
Monday 27/7/98	Morning	General concepts	· Impairment, disability, handicap · Accessibility, assistive devices
	Afternoon	Group-work No.1	· Definition of autonomy
Tuesday 28/7/98	Morning	Personal Care	· Organising the home · Personal hygiene and body care
	Afternoon	Group-work No.2	· Adapting a flat to participant needs

Wednesday 29/7/98	Morning	Wheelchairs and seating	· Manual and electronic wheelchairs · Seating systems
	Afternoon	Legislation	· Italy's legislative framework · Regulations on AT and accessibility
Thursday 30/7/98	Morning	Outdoor environment	· AT for outdoor mobility · AT for leisure and sport
	Afternoon	Social programme	· Outing in the Dolomite Mountains
Friday 31/7/98	Morning	Communication	· AT for communication · Environmental control and telecommunication devices · Corporeity aspects: body, communication, sexuality
	Afternoon	Group-work No.3	· The individual, family and society
Saturday 1/8/98	Morning	Computer access	· Computer-based AT · Technical aids exhibition
	Afternoon	Information resources	· The SIVA information network · Centro Studi Prisma · Networks in the European Union
	Evening	Farewell session	· Course Evaluation
Sunday 2/8/98	Morning	Departure	

Second Level Course		Programme	
		Session	Topic
Sunday 2/8/98	Afternoon	Arrival / accommodation	
	Evening	Welcome session	
Monday 3/8/98	Morning	Social image of disability	· Disability and AT in the mass-media · Analysis of contents in the media
	Afternoon	Group work No. 1	· Analysis of messages
Tuesday 4/8/98	Morning	Disability and School	· Disability and AT as educational experiences
	Afternoon	Group work No. 2	· Bringing the disability experience to the school
Wednesday 5/8/98	Morning	Human relationships	· Talking techniques and group dynamics
	Afternoon	Group work No. 3	· Practising relationships
Thursday 6/8/98	Morning	Organisational techniques	· Peer counselling and peer mentoring · Setting up AT information services
	Afternoon	Group work No. 4	· Organising educational initiatives
Friday 7/8/98	Morning	Social image of disability	· Creating messages
	Afternoon	Group work No. 5	· Interviewing
Saturday 8/8/98	Morning	Acting and networking	· Promotion of autonomy in local communities
	Afternoon	Farewell session	· Course evaluation

Courses	timetable								
	9.00	10.30	11.00	13.00	16.00	17.30	18.00	20.00	21.30
Lesson		coffee break	Lesson	Lunch	Group-work or lesson	coffee break	Discussion or lesson	Dinner	Social programme

Running the course

Co-ordination and management

As the courses were residential, great attention was paid to accommodation matters (distribution of rooms, time necessary to get ready in the morning, etc).

Educational co-ordination involved the whole staff (director, teachers and group work co-ordinators) attending two progress meetings scheduled on Monday and Thursday at 9.30 p.m., and a final evaluation meeting held on Sunday morning from 9 a.m. to 1 p.m.

The *director's* tasks were to ensure the coherence of the course, co-ordinate all teaching matters, and make any organisational and financial decisions. He co-ordinated the team meetings, attended all the lessons, and - with the help of the other teachers - prepared the educational material, the handouts and the group-work material. He also had to ensure that all aspects adhered to the mission, approach and style of *Centro Studi Prisma*. To this end, the directors of the various editions over the years were people who had been first *trainees* in both the first and second-level courses, then *group work co-ordinators*, and possibly also *teachers*. Strong co-ordination proved to be extremely important for the success of the course.

Lessons

Most lessons were in the form of a lecture. Teachers were asked to use simple language, to include numerous examples, and make extensive use of overhead, slide, video and computer presentations. In each lesson, handouts were distributed listing the main concepts covered, so as to facilitate understanding and memorisation, and prepare for the group work to be held in the afternoon. *Interactivity, discussion, learning by doing* and *good presentation* were the four keywords used by the teachers to describe their preferred learning style.

The lectures were aimed at introducing basic concepts, problems and solutions related to daily living with a disability; AT products were sometimes presented and demonstrated. Whenever possible, the whole teaching staff attended each lecture, so as to ensure solid feedback afterwards and to avoid repetitions or gaps. This did not limit each teacher's freedom to choose teaching style, since differences in style were greatly appreciated and considered valuable. The development of topics within each lesson was often sorted so as to start from the body level, then gradually expand to wider living spaces such as the person, the home, the neighbour, the town and the world.

Each teacher was selected on the grounds of his/her competence and experience in the assigned subject. At competence parity, preference was given to candidates with a disability (being able to speak from "inside the disability"), maturity (being able to speak from "outside the disability"), and ability to communicate positively.

Group work

Each group work session was led by a *work-group co-ordinator*. All the co-ordinators were persons with disabilities, chosen for their experience, competence and reliability, as well for having participated in previous editions of the course. In the *first level course*, the participants were divided into five work groups, three of them composed of disabled persons (eight per group) and the other two of their personal assistants (nine per group). The groups of participants with disability were heterogeneous in terms of disability, age, sex and place of origin. The groups of personal assistants were heterogeneous in terms of role (family member, friend,

volunteer, professional, etc), age, sex, and place of origin. At the end of each group-work session, the groups presented the results of their studies in a plenary session.

AT information and personal advice

During the breaks in the *first-level course*, a professional AT expert - herself a person with disabilities and a member of the Prisma staff - was available upon appointment to discuss personally individual problems that could be solved by AT. The chosen setting was one deemed appropriate for conversation and equipped with a computer for browsing the SIVA CD-ROM (the Italian Assistive Technology database).

An exhibition of selected AT devices was also set up on the last day of the *first-level course*, in co-operation with some AT suppliers. As well as viewing the products on show, participants were invited to share their personal experiences of AT (home arrangements, aids, inventions, tips for autonomy, etc) and to illustrate them with slides, photos and the like.

Social programme

Although offered as optional activities, the social events were designed to be consistent with the course mission. The social programme of the *first-level course* consisted of four evening meetings:

- videos on subjects covered in the day's lessons (Monday);
- meeting with representatives from the region's user organisations (Wednesday);
- meeting with representatives from the local authorities (Friday);
- farewell party organised by the participants themselves (Saturday).

In addition, an outing in the Dolomites was organised for Thursday afternoon, including a visit to beauty spots, a ride along the area's one accessible mountain trail, a ride up to a mountain top in an accessible cable-car, and free time for shopping and leisure. This outing followed the morning lessons about AT for outdoor mobility, leisure and sport. It was an opportunity to strengthen relationships among participants, and for many a discovery that "nature can be accessible".

Evaluation and follow-up

In the farewell session, the trainees were issued with an attendance certificate. A general discussion was held in which each participant publicly expressed his/her views on the course. A final questionnaire was also handed out, compiled and collected. The information thus gathered was later used by the staff to evaluate not only the effectiveness of the course, but also the organisation's general educational activity.