

Empowering through assistive technology: methods and tools developed by the European EUSTAT Study

Renzo ANDRICH

IRCCS Fondazione Don Carlo Gnocchi, Milano Italy

Background

This fact sheet reports on the findings of the EU-funded EUSTAT project (Empowering Users through Assistive Technology), carried out in 1997-1999 by an international consortium including organisations of people with disabilities, academic institutions and rehabilitation centres. Although it was a pioneering study and assistive technology (AT) has significantly advanced since that time, the relational approach and the methodologies developed by the EUSTAT study are still fully valid today.

The initial assumption was that awareness and knowledge of AT are key factors in supporting empowerment of people with disabilities, and they also greatly contribute to the success of AT solutions. The main research question was about which criteria should drive the design of effective educational initiatives that lead to the empowerment of people with disabilities in relation to AT.

Activity report

The project activities proceeded in five steps [1]:

1. identification of the **critical factors** involved in education of end-users of assistive technology (by means of literature review and interviews to key stakeholders);
2. survey of **ongoing initiatives** related to AT education of end-users in various EU Countries and also overseas (60 initiatives were found at that time and were analysed, based on a common grid);
3. based on the critical factor identified and on the findings of the survey, a couple of **handbooks** were developed and published, for the end-users and for the teachers respectively, to be used as educational material for courses addressed to people with disabilities;
4. based on the above, three **pilot courses** were designed and carried out in order to validate the methodology and the educational material in different contexts and formats: a short course (half day seminar, which was tried out in Belgium), a serial course (five half-day seminars, which was tried out in France) and a residential course (a full-immersion week, which was tried out in Italy) (**Picture 1**).
5. Finally, the methodology was refined and published (the **EUSTAT methodology for empowerment of end-users in relation to assistive technology**) as well as the educational material. Now the latter is composed of two handbooks which have been translated into seven languages and disseminated in many countries worldwide.



Picture 1- The teaching staff at a residential course

The English title of the end-user handbook is ***Go for it! A User Manual on Assistive Technology***¹ while the English title of the trainer handbook is ***Assistive Technology Education for end-users: guidelines for trainers***². This material can be used in many different kinds of educational activities, such as courses, seminars, workshops and conference cycles, addressed to people of any ages and disabilities.



Picture 2 - The EUSTAT handbook

Whatever format and audience is chosen, the methodology developed by the Study indicates four classes of critical factors that should be addressed in order to design an effective educational initiative:

- positioning factors;
- factors related to the transfer of knowledge to the group;
- factors related to the reception of knowledge by the individual;
- factors related to the transformation of knowledge into initiative.

The trainer handbook provides guidelines on how to address each factor so as to help the organiser make appropriate decisions. The dissertation is illustrated with a detailed report of the three pilot courses carried out in the fourth stage of the project, serving as inspiration for anybody who intends to carry out similar initiatives.

Conclusions

Since the publication of the EUSTAT methodology and of the handbooks, many organisations throughout the world – especially user organisations and rehabilitation providers – were inspired to think about the need to facilitate empowerment of people with disabilities in relation to AT. The EUSTAT partners went on carrying out courses every year, taking advantage of the lesson learned within the project. Other organisations initiated new courses – each one localised in a specific geographical and human context – and some others included the EUSTAT methodology in educational programmes addressed to rehabilitation or education professionals.

After over 15 years – despite the great technological advancement – the methodology is still valid. Of course, as time evolves, the programmes of educational activities based on this methodology need to be continuously revised or redesigned, in order to fit the technological advancement, the social changes and the local environments. However, the EUSTAT handbooks are not intended to “provide the fish” (indicating turnkey solutions); they are rather intended to “teach the person to fish” (master the process that leads from the recognition of a need to deciding a solution). Although some chapters of the **end-user handbook** are partially obsolete today - in that they show examples referred to technologies available at that time - most other chapters are still valid, especially those related to how to self-assess one's own needs. Conversely, the **trainer handbook** is fully usable: it helps design educational programmes on AT within an empowerment perspective, independently of specific technologies.

References

Andrich R. Besio S (2002): *Being informed, demanding and responsible consumers of assistive technology: an educational issue*. Disabil Rehabil 24:152-159.

Contact details

Renzo Andrich, IRCCS Fondazione Don Carlo Gnocchi, Milano Italy, renzo.andrich@siva.it

¹ downloadable from <http://portale.siva.it/en-GB/databases/libraries/detail/id-6> in seven languages

² downloadable from <http://portale.siva.it/en-GB/databases/libraries/detail/id-1> in seven languages