

Implementing Assistive Technology Through User Groups

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Building the capacity of education professionals to make effective assistive technology (AT) decisions requires varying supports. One effective approach used in Central Illinois is to develop and maintain user groups comprising skilled practitioners and those interested in developing new AT skill sets. What are the key questions to consider when developing AT user groups? What makes an AT user group successful?

Schools increasingly use a wide array of assistive technology (AT) devices with students with disabilities. The Individuals With Disabilities Education Improvement Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004) defines AT devices as “any item, piece of equipment or product system, whether acquired commercially or off the shelf, modified, or customized, that is used to increase, maintain, or improve functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities” (20 U.S.C. 1401 § 602(1)(A)). Most education professionals are familiar with the range of AT devices found in many classroom settings (e.g., electronic communication devices, visual schedules, adaptive feeding utensils, environmental control devices, mobility devices, and academic supports such as word prediction and

spell-check software and text readers). IDEA 2004 requires AT to be “considered” by individualized education program (IEP) teams for all children with disabilities (20 U.S.C. § 1414(3)(B)(v)); numerous resources are available to assist education professionals in this process (see e.g., Assistive Technology Training Online Project, 2005; Center for Technology Education and Technology and Media Division, 2005; Edyburn, 2003; Reed & Lahm, 2004).

IEP teams face a series of decision-making steps to determine appropriate AT support for a student (see Table 1). Teachers providing instruction to students with disabilities must, at a minimum, understand these basic steps, have a working knowledge of how to effectively use a cadre of AT devices in educational milieus, and understand and use strategies for determining AT outcomes.

Effective participation in this process is one of the great challenges in special

education, and there is a continuing need for a broad base of effectively prepared special education professionals who can consider and implement AT in classroom settings (Parette, Peterson-Karlan, Smith, Gray, & Silver-Pacuilla, 2006; SEAT Center, 2004). Unfortunately, most teacher preparation programs in the United States do not effectively train teachers to use AT (Parette, Peterson-Karlan et al., 2006). As a result, most IEP teams still rely on “experts” (i.e., one or a few people with special skill sets regarding AT) who can provide recommendations and even assume primary responsibility for all AT decisions. Reliance on experts is also reflected in current approaches to AT professional development: For workshops and other professional development, schools bring in experts whose knowledge bases regarding certain products or technologies can be distilled or “funneled” to the target constituencies (Parette, 2006; SEAT Center).

However, such a model may not produce the skills needed to produce effective AT interventions for students with disabilities. The expert-based workshop model may produce changes in adult awareness or in knowledge at an introductory level, but it cannot produce lasting changes in skills. Adult learners need to apply new knowledge, receive feedback on their attempts at application, and have opportunities to make changes to their applications. The result is that a broad base of effectively prepared professionals is never developed within a school district, and schools continue to rely on experts for consultation and professional development. Arguably, teachers have a mandated obligation to increase their understanding of the AT decision-making and implementation process to ensure their effectiveness on IEP teams.

As school systems struggle with the issue of developing a broader base of competent AT practitioners, we can anticipate a greater emphasis on school "communities of practice" (Funderstanding, 1998-2001). Such communities acknowledge that (a) learning is a social phenomenon; (b) people organize their learning around social communities such as schools; and (c) real knowledge is interwoven in the doing, social relations, and expertise of education professionals in school settings.

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As noted by Edyburn (2005b), "learning by doing is essential to the task of building knowledge" (p. 69). Typically, the few education professionals in school districts who have great experience in using AT have indeed learned by doing. Schools often rely heavily on these "local experts" to play a primary role in helping IEP teams

Table 1. The AT Consideration Process

IEP Team Tasks	AT Considerations
Review the child's present level of performance and other relevant information	What AT has the student used in the past?
Develop annual goals, benchmarks, and objectives	Does the student need AT?
Identify tasks required to accomplish goals	What AT options are available to help compensate for difficulties the student demonstrates in daily tasks?
Determine the difficulty level of tasks presented to the student	Which AT options are best for the student?
Identify appropriate supports and services, including AT	What is the best way to implement the AT options in the classroom?

From Center for Technology Education and Technology and Media Division (2005). *Considering the need for assistive technology within the individualized education program*. Columbia, MD: Author. Adapted with permission.

make AT decisions. But again, this reliance on local experts still results in failure to develop a broad base of AT competencies among other special and general education professionals. One approach to broadening the knowledge and skill base that holds great promise for schools is developing and supporting AT user groups within districts.

User Groups: An Effective Strategy for Increasing an AT Knowledge Base

When we think of AT "user groups," we generally picture the actual users of AT as the constituents, rather than their teachers. The U.S. Department of Commerce (n.d.) noted that vendor reliance on AT consumer user groups' feedback during product development enables the vendor to understand "subtle differences that can distinguish a good product from a great one." Technology user groups for general education teachers have a presence on the World Wide Web (see e.g., KCP Technologies, Inc., 2006; San Diego Supercomputer Center, 2006), though the emphasis in these forums has been primarily on information technologies.

Over the past several years, AT user groups of special education teachers in Central Illinois have effectively developed a broad base of AT practitioners

across school districts. These teachers are members of the Heart of Illinois Low Incidence Association (HILIA), a six-county coalition of four special education administrative units. More recently, the user groups have been effectively used with early childhood teachers serving preschool students who are at risk or who have disabilities (Parette, Watts, & Stoner, 2005) and with intermediate elementary through high school special education teachers serving students with academic and learning disabilities (Peterson-Karlan, Wojcik, & Parette, 2006). The success of this group can be emulated in other regions, once school districts and practitioners understand the four key elements (see box, "Key Elements of Developing, Implementing, and Supporting AT User Groups") in developing, implementing,

Key Elements of Developing, Implementing, and Supporting AT User Groups

- ☞ Identify core members and leadership roles
- ☞ Identify resource commitments
- ☞ Conduct meetings
- ☞ Monitor outcomes

What Is an AT User Group?

An AT user group is a group of education professionals who

- ✓ Have a shared interest in AT.
- ✓ Are committed to developing new skill sets about an array of AT devices and implementation in the learning community.
- ✓ Are supported for their participation in the user group setting.
- ✓ Share their learning with other education professionals in the community.

and supporting AT user groups in public school settings.

Identify the Core Members and Leadership Roles

Every school system has one or more education professionals with a special interest in AT. Both administrators and other teachers are aware of these key personnel, who regularly contribute to AT team decision-making and other professional activities. The AT user group ideally includes all personnel with a history of involvement in AT—those with little as well as more experience (see box, “What is an AT User Group?”). Depending on the size of the group, space constraints, and resources available to support the group, other targeted education professionals also may be invited to participate.

An important decision for the group to make at its first meeting is whether “shared” leadership for the operations of the group is appropriate. AT user group leaders should have higher level AT skill sets than teacher participants to facilitate scaffolding of meeting content and addressing the concerns and needs of the group. In some smaller school districts there may only be one individual with the level of AT skills required to lead the group. However, larger districts often benefit from not having a single group leader—it may ensure buy-in from all members and communicate that each member is equally valued. The presence of several leaders enhances the one-on-one technical

assistance provided to user group participants, while also affording the entire group diverse perspectives on AT use. Additionally, multiple leaders can minimize the emergence of hidden or personal agendas, both of which can create barriers for sustained growth and nurturance of the user group.

KEY QUESTIONS: Qualifications of an AT User Group Leader

- Does the person participate in AT decision making on a regular basis?
- Does the person use AT in his or her classroom setting on a regular basis?
- Is the person recognized by the school system as having special skill sets in AT decision making?
- Does the person participate in or conduct AT professional development activities on a regular basis?

Identify Resource Commitments

The second step in establishing an AT user group is to identify resource commitments: Where will meetings be held (e.g., computer labs), how often, and at what time intervals? What AT products (e.g., software or devices) are available to or have been distributed to personnel within the district? What type of support (e.g., stipends, professional development credits, district server space for archiving work products, e-mail access) is there for maintaining the group? Some decisions require the involvement of key district administrative personnel who have both the information and the authority to assign or relegate resources. Other decisions (e.g., how often to meet, at what time intervals, and what AT to focus upon) may require an organizational meeting of the potential user group participants themselves. Alternatively, such decisions can be made by key school administrators as part of their professional development planning or part of a special initiative (e.g., distribution and examination of a specific item of AT across several classrooms and teachers).

Although resources vary across school systems, it is reasonable to assume that physical space for the user group can be provided and regularly scheduled somewhere within the

school or district. Conducting these meetings in a computer laboratory or wireless environment is highly advantageous and allows the group to use computer-based applications. Lacking such a resource, the group could negotiate agreements with local community colleges or universities to use computer laboratory space (or specialized lab facilities) and to receive continuing education units (CEUs) or continuing professional development units (CPDUs). Alternatively, user groups may be able to negotiate a collaborative agreement with a specialized AT center (see, e.g., SEAT Center at <http://www.seat.ilstu.org/>) for the array of presentation hardware and software needed to support the group. Related to this issue of computer resources is the need to ensure that the technologies used by the group, both in the user group sessions and in classroom settings, are transferable. Can the devices and/or software be used both in the participant's classroom and in the user group setting? If not, successful acquisition or transfer of skills may be minimized if participants cannot practice and implement new skills immediately in their classrooms with students having disabilities.

Another important support consideration is the development of user group communication and participant materials; how will the group communicate successful strategies and distribute documents or files to help participants, both during and after the session has concluded? Even simply providing the opportunity for teachers to share “aha!” moments with others (when new and exciting learning has just occurred) can be helpful. Other strategies and materials that can provide valued support to teachers include:

- “Cheat sheets” of steps or instructions related to lecture and hands-on experiences.
- Distributing materials used or shared with participants during the sessions through e-mail, custom CDs, flash drives, or Web sites.
- Multiple helpers, especially during more complex demonstrations.
- Developing tutorials related to use of specific AT applications.

Another important support is incentives for general or special education teachers who are interested in developing new skills, but who are relatively new to AT service delivery. HILIA, a special education coalition in mid-central Illinois, provides new participants with a copy of software-based AT (e.g., Boardmaker[®]) or a device (e.g., Alphasmart[®])—for both personal skill development as well as implementation with students. Other projects offer small stipends; the Making A Difference Using Assistive Technology (MDAT) Project provided stipends of \$250 to promote user group participation among preschool teachers developing new AT competencies to use in their classrooms (Parette et al., 2005). Participants who attended six out of eight scheduled group meetings received a full stipend, and those participating in half of the group sessions received \$125. In another instance (Peterson-Karlan et al., 2006), stipends of \$500 were used with more experienced teachers who made a commitment not only to learning and using a new writing support software product (SOLO[™]), but to a rigorous schedule of writing sample data collection and scoring across a 4-month time span as part of a comprehensive examination of AT effectiveness. Some monetary support—especially for new teachers seeking to develop new skill sets—may be especially important to encourage both initial and ongoing participation, until the experience becomes intrinsically motivating. Small grants (Parette, Murdick, & Gartin, 1996) from civic organizations or community businesses (e.g., Wal-Mart) may also provide a resource for the stipends. As mentioned previously, CEUs or CPDUs issued either by the school district or in partnership with institutions of higher education can also be effective incentives. The MDAT Project arranged a CPDU agreement with the SEAT Center at Illinois State University for participants in the early childhood project.

KEY QUESTIONS: Resources

- Where will meetings be held?
- Will computer or wireless resources be available?



- Will the group have access to AT resources for demonstration and shared problem solving at home? the user group setting?
- Are incentives or fiscal supports available from the school or other community resources?
- Can participants receive CEUs or CPDUs for participation?

Conducting Meetings

User group meetings may be (a) *open-ended* (and respond to whatever issues and concerns users have); (b) *scaffolded* (allowing user input regarding direction of the group, while also communicating expectations for performance or accomplishments by the end of the session); or (c) *highly structured* (to allow specific content to be delivered based on assessed needs of participants). Initially, it may be advantageous to have a single person conduct a series of sessions on targeted topics based on interviews with or surveys of targeted participants. For example, using a highly structured approach, we conducted a series of eight user group sessions focusing on an AT toolkit designed to develop emergent writing skills among preschool children (Parette et al., 2005; Parette, Stoner, Watts, & Wojcik, 2006). A primary facilitator with an Assistive Technology Practitioner (ATP) credential led each user group session. Prior to each meet-

ing, participants were asked via e-mail about their preferences and interests regarding the AT toolkit and its implementation in their respective classrooms. This information was used to customize the content delivered to participants.

To further support the user group session(s), depending on resources and time available, the facilitator can burn CDs of information used at the group meeting (e.g., listings of Web resources, PowerPoint files, PDF files, multimedia productions). In other instances, participants could discuss their learning needs and issues at the beginning of the user group session, followed by a response on the part of the facilitator/s to meet those articulated needs. Again, the importance of having a skilled education professional, one having higher level skills than other participants, is critical for this approach to be effective.

Teachers in the user group to support implementation of the writing software (Peterson-Karlan et al., 2006) contacted us via e-mail to ask technical questions or relate problems related to installation or implementation of the software prior to sessions (e.g., installation on a networked computer or use of the teacher-controlled component for managing student assignments and folders). We used these messages to prepare user group information or demonstrations, often in

the form of a Microsoft® (MS) Power-Point or a MS® Producer presentation, on how to address the problem. Participants could take the presentations with them on a flash drive, or download them from a Web site. In one instance, prior communication of technical issues resulted in the vendor providing a “patch” that was demonstrated at the user group meeting and distributed via an e-mail containing a link to the vendor’s Web site. Such implementation issues were always addressed at the beginning of each meeting, with participants often providing additional questions or issues. Other participants in the user group might have strategies or ways of addressing an issue; in other instances, we would defer problems for which solutions were not readily available and use e-mail later to provide solutions, either to all or to specific users. Following the problem-solving time, we would focus on specific in-depth topics related to assessment of writing.

At the beginning of each user group meeting, it is important to provide an overview of what will be covered in the session, while affording all participants an opportunity to ask questions and share any concerns and insights regarding specific AT applications. Then, a specific agenda for the meeting can be implemented. Table 2 presents sample user group agendas. The sample agenda for an early childhood education user group was held in a wireless computer laboratory with specialized software accessible on all computers, and a presenter’s unit, projection system, and Smartboard for use by the facilitator (Parette et al., 2005). The intermediate elementary, middle and high school user group settings included a computer laboratory supported by a university and one maintained by a public school (Peterson-Karlan et al., 2006).

KEY QUESTIONS: Conducting Meetings

- Who has the specialized AT skill sets needed to conduct the meeting?
- What type of session is planned (open-ended, scaffolded, structured, combined)?

Table 2. Sample User Group Agendas

AT User Group Agenda for Early Childhood Personnel Focusing on Boardmaker®

- Welcome and scope of user group session
- Questions and answers
- Overview of Boardmaker® features
- Feature-by-feature demonstration using projection system with follow-along hands-on by participants
- Respond to questions at each step of demonstration process
- Create a customized visual schedule for teachers’ classrooms
- Incorporate auditory elements to make a “talking” communication board
- Brainstorm outcomes monitoring strategies
- Share work with others
- Back up work and burn CDs to share with teachers containing group products
- Assign “homework” for next session

AT User Group Agenda for Middle and High School Personnel Focusing on Use of SOLO® to Support Writing

- Group teachers into grade-level cohorts and exchange e-mails
- Address SOLO® technical issues (e.g., file transfer)
- Address SOLO® implementation
- Share any “created” products (e.g., templates)
- Address implementation questions/issues
- Discuss writing outcomes data collection
- Discuss how they are presently teaching writing
- Discuss how they are evaluating writing progress and writing progress with AT supports. (Bring examples of protocols, writing sample tasks, etc.)
- Present/discuss “Writing Sample Probe System” and writing sample scoring training (for next session)
- Future user group schedule

- What type and nature of resources are needed to support the work of the group for each session?
- Who will compile or create the support resources?
- How will resources be distributed?

Monitoring Outcomes

Participants in AT user groups certainly should expect to develop some new skills, and that is one type of outcome that may result. However, those newly acquired skills mean little if they are not implemented in classroom settings and the effect on student learning is not monitored. Both the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 and IDEA 2004 mandate different, yet related, types of outcomes accountability on the part of teachers. If education professionals commit time and effort toward developing new AT skill sets, there should be corresponding outcomes resulting from such participation. There may be *teacher outcomes*, such as an increase in the number of (a) professional develop-

ment workshops attended after user group participation, (b) Web sites visited to obtain additional information, (c) consultations with other general or special education practitioners regarding AT strategies, and (d) classroom products created and implemented with children.

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There may also be *student outcomes* for consideration by user group members (see, e.g., Edyburn, 2005a; Smith, 2000). For example, the SEAT Center has conducted AT user groups with a focus on use of a particular software program designed to increase writing proficiency among students with learning and academic disabilities (Peterson-

Tips for AT User Group Facilitators

- Keep lecture content to an absolute minimum and emphasize hands-on experiences.
- Focus on a few AT subjects rather than a wide range of strategies and applications.
- Be prepared for varying AT skill and knowledge levels among participants.
- Set completion of hands-on experiences and user-generated products as a goal for each session.
- Use “group” AT experiential activities as much as possible.
- Design AT experiences that can reasonably be completed during the user group session.
- Leave egos at the front door to create sense of “shared community.”
- Have a “quick start” and a “big finish” whenever possible.
- Try never to talk more than 10–15 minutes without doing something interactive with AT products.
- Don’t assume that learning has taken place because something has been “said”; provide opportunities for participants to demonstrate their newly acquired skills.
- Be passionate about the AT content/topics being discussed to generate enthusiasm.

Karlan et al., 2006), with teachers across intermediate elementary, middle, junior, and high school classrooms serving students with disabilities. Within the user group sessions on using the writing support software, we embedded structured training in the use of writing sample probes using a concurrent time series research design (Peterson-Karlan et al.). Such focused training in the context of a user group allowed both hands-on experience in using the software with students and also training in how

to capture data to assess the impact of AT implementation on student learning.

KEY QUESTIONS: Outcomes Monitoring

- What are the critical desired AT outcomes of the user group sessions (teacher, student, or both)?
- What is the process for assessing the outcomes?

Final Thoughts

User groups are an emerging and powerful venue for education professionals to develop a range of new AT skills. As one teacher who participated in a series of six user groups noted,

I thought they were invaluable . . . because the training has to be hands on, particularly for me, and then we were allowed to work on things that were of our own interest. And that is much more motivating, much less frustrating, than sitting in a classroom and talking about—you’re going to do this—and by the time you get back to work you’ve forgotten. (Personal confidential communication)

Similarly, another teacher commented that user groups provided:

The opportunity to have people to answer questions and at the same time giving you as much help or as little help as you needed. You had time to explore and do things on your own and plan on your own but yet if you came into a question there were people there to answer. It was also nice to have everybody in one place working on computers at the same time to kind of toss around ideas, see what other people were doing, maybe spark some ideas of your own. (Personal confidential communication)

These newly acquired AT skills may arguably contribute to enhanced student learning in classroom settings, assuming appropriate strategies are in place for documenting outcomes subsequent to education professional participation in user groups. This article discusses some of the things we have learned from conducting such groups in recent years, which has provided a blue-

print for continuing collaborations with public schools in our efforts to effectively prepare education professionals to use AT with their students with disabilities (see box, “Tips for AT User Group Facilitators”).

However, a caveat to creating any forum for working with adult learners is adherence to some basic principles that guide adult learning (Educational Technology Clearinghouse, 2004; Imel, 1998). These include programs that (a) acknowledge that adults are practical and problem-centered, (b) promote their positive self-esteem, (c) integrate new ideas with existing knowledge, (d) capitalize on their past experiences, and (e) permit choice and self-direction (Goodlad, 1984). Each of these principles may be attended to in the context of user groups, contributing to better trained teachers who ultimately enhance the districtwide AT knowledge base.

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