THIS IS MY STORY, THESE ARE MY TOOLS: DIGITAL STORYTELLING FOR SELF-EXPRESSION AND COMMUNICATION

Digital storytelling for a group of young adults – students and former students of upper secondary school, (aged 18-20) with cognitive disabilities and in some cases with a socially disadvantaged background. Educators use the digital storytelling method in face-to--face workshop activities to enhance students' self-narration and increase therir confidence, communication, social and organizational abilities, as well as the use of portable digital devices (tablet, smartphone) for self-expression. The specific learning path highlights the features of an activity developed with a learner with severe cognitive and phisical disabilities.
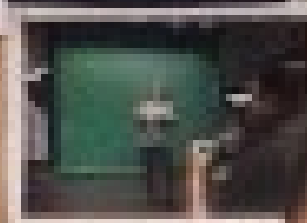
	Learning Path **DIGITAL STORYTELLING FOR SELF-EXPRESSION AND COMMUNICATION** **1) THIS IS MY STORY, THESE ARE MY TOOLS**
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Target group	The target group in this training activity is a group of young adults with various kinds of cognitive disabilities. As each trainee may (and probably will) have specific learning difficulties, during the workshop each trainee will receive as much as possible 1/1 assistance, personalized inputs and – besides the plenary sessions – will develop the learning process and tasks in their own specific way. The personalized part of this learning path is especially tailored for a person with severe cognitive disabilities, with some physical impairments, and consequent limits in communicational skills.
Description of the challenges	General challenges: trainers with different "entry levels" in cognitive abilities and technical competences; poor communicational skills; short span of attention in comparison with the required task; on the trainers' hand, need to simplify – sometimes to an extreme extent - the explanation of tasks and processes to the trainees.

Training Point *Or* *How does this challenge affect motivation and achievement in your group?*	Such a workshop brings to the fore - for both teachers/trainers and trainees – the potential of an item of experience, which is very fashionable among the young: capturing and sharing a glimpse from own life via personal digital devices. Such a common act is often performed with little awareness both of its implications and of its potential. On the other hand, teachers/trainers, who belong to a different generation, may not fully consider the potential of involvement, motivation and ability stimulation of an activity of digital narrative about oneself or for the young. The general purpose of this learning path is to give the young disabled the chance to structure and introduce an insight from their life to their peers, their families, and potentially to any person; and to give both the young people and the practitioners working with them as teachers/trainers an increased awareness of what can be purposefully done with the narrative potentialities of digital tools both for self-expression and to overcome the obstacles to effective communication which arise from disability.
Description of the activities	This learning path is to be divided in 2 parts: the plenary sessions, where introductory activities are performed both in frontal and participatory way by the trainers with the trainees' group; and the individual sessions, where each trainee receives 1/1 training and support, according to their specific features and needs. Such a learning path has been tested in a group of 7 young adults with 8 trainers. The same trainers should be involved through the workshop, each of them assisting the same trainee according to the trainee's needs. Yet, if trainers' rotation is unavoidable, it can also be done with 2 trainers acting as coordinators/ /supervisors while the rest of the trainers' group may alternate, given that all trainers maintain good communication with the coordinators and that they are experienced in working with the disabled, as a consequence they can adapt quickly to the different requirements and needs of the specific trainee they assist in each session. It requires basic equipment: a room wide enough to allow the group to move around easily, with chairs and desks for everyone; a basic choice of digital tools to take pictures or film short videos (smartphone, tablet, digital cameras); a laptop or desktop computer and a printer for easier production, though videos can also be edited on smartphones using apps; flip board chart, blank paper storyboards, removable sticky notepapers, multi-colour felt tip pens, A4 sheets of paper.

All activities are implemented in-presence. A workshop constitutes 8 sessions which lasts on average 1.5 hours each. This should be sufficient to allow the trainees to plan their digital story, to complete a detailed storyboard, to choose what visual and audio material they need, to collect or produce and select it. Technical editing, which can be difficult due both to cognitive and movement disabilities, either deserves a workshop of its own or can be performed by the trainers under the direction of the trainees and according to their storyboards. Digital editing is not part of this learning path.

1. Plenary sessions: group activity for introduction to storytelling
The plenary (group) sessions are mainly based on verbal and physical interaction. A presence of support teachers or assistants in a proportion of about 1/1 is required, to make sure that anytime each participant will receive specific attention and supplementary explanations if required.
Group activities are aimed to create a positive and trusting climate while introducing the idea of telling a story. That can be done by circle games, self-introductions, some very simple storytelling about self. Notes from the trainees' tales about self can be taken in very simple writing or drawings and schemes on the flip board chart, to go back to them whenever needed and pick useful elements for storytelling. When the trainers believe that the right climate has been created and that the capability to tell a simple story about self has been experienced, it is possible to pass to the final activity of this phase: a visual explanation (e.g.; a poster with a sequence of comic-like scenes commented by a trainer) of what the goal of the workshop is. The visual focuses on the 5 sequential basic steps to create a short autobiographic digital story - Idea, Script, Storyboard, Research and Edit – as well as on the tools and materials which can be used. As stated above, the last step is only hinted at, if it is not required that the trainees learn how to make it technically. The plenary sessions last approximately 3 hours in total.

2. Face-to-face, 1/1 starting-point assessment conversation
Each trainee should be interviewed in a 1/1 mode by an assistant, to ascertain their interest in the activity and their competence level, both as "narrators" and as digital tools users. There is no rigid scheme of questions, as the different ability levels require adaptation and suitable rephrasing from the trainer's side.

Topics basically are: what common digital tools the trainee can use (e.g. smartphone, tablet, digital camera, PC); if the trainee knows and can use social networks or messaging tools where written, visual, audio and video messages can be posted; what are the actual technical skills of the trainee with such tools and his/her liking of them. Such a conversation, to be recorded by the interviewer, can also serve as basis for the evaluation of the activity together with a similar final interview. Each interview will take not more than 15 minutes.

From this point on work is 1/1 with assistance for each trainee. Each assistant should focus, and help the trainee focus, on what the trainee can technically already do, and on what tools are at reach, and encourage the trainee to develop the creative part of the storytelling starting from such granted elements. This specific learning path has been adapted to the features of a trainee with severe cognitive disability, some physical impairment, such as sight or movement ones, and trainees with severe specific learning difficulties.

3. "This is my story, these are my tools"
A young person with severe cognitive disabilities and physical impairments has interests, likes and dislikes the same as everyone else. A simple conversation will bring to light an interesting, emotionally strong topic connected to everyday life materials can be easily collected or produced about, and which the trainee would like to share with others. For such a trainee a narration made of a sequence of still images with a simple music to be selected by the trainee from a repertoire suggested by the trainer can be the most suitable way to tell a story. Such a choice can overcome difficulties with spoken or written language, or with producing and performing logical connection with materials where the message is conveyed by a mix of several different and ever-changing elements, such as short videos with movement and sounds. After choosing a topic, the graphic storyboard will help define what elements are needed and in what sequence they will be first arranged.
The following step is the collection of pictures. Among the digital equipment's available, one that can stimulate the interest of the trainee and can be easily used is a tablet. Such a tool is very common and "fashionable," therefore attractive; it can help focus on the frame and take pictures with very simple gestures.

	The size of the frame, larger than the one available with phones or digital cameras, helps trainees with visual impairment; the possibility to see clearly, immediately the result of each shot helps the trainee to evaluate them and make a first choice. A further selection requires previous print of the photos. The visual immediacy of the prints, the use of number sequences allow the trainee to evaluate if changes to the storyboard sequence are to be made, until the trainee reaches a sequence which is satisfactory to him/her. A simple spoken comment by the trainee can be written down by the assistant, who can also provide a small choice of possible soundtracks from public-domain digital scores libraries, and let the trainee select a preferred one. The verbal comments and/or the soundtrack will be added to the frame sequence by a trainer/assistant according to trainee indications. The trainee validates the final product in any case.
Learning Outcomes	In such workshop framework, the trainee will: • acquire new skills: understand the idea of a simple story made purposeful by personal feelings to be told as a task to be accomplished; how to implement, with some assistance, the simple step-by-step process to follow to create a digital story; use of portable digital device to portray selected items of reality; • use their own existing communicational or technical skills to: express preferences about the visual story to be told, plan where and how to collect the materials, exploit own previous experience with digital tools, share her project with teachers and school mates involved; • focus and train on specific skills of general use: understand time or logical sequences (thanks to content analysis of images, numbers, arrangement of still pictures in space); use of paths and schemes for organization and reorganization of information and for self-expression; conversation; selection and decision-making.

Foreseen impact on the direct beneficiaries	The direct beneficiary gets trained to use articulately an approach to reality (picture-making) which acquires meaning according to the purposefulness in the selection and organization work he/she performs. Abilities of self-analysis, logical thinking, goal-setting and action-planning to reach it, dialogue with other people to express own purposes and requests are fostered. Personal interests and feelings are brought to the fore and acknowledged importance to in a learning/training context. This can increase motivation as a lasting learning result, and encourage a more active participatory role for the trainee. Satisfaction with the result accomplished should increase self-esteem levels.
Foreseen impact on the indirect beneficiaries	We can consider indirect beneficiaries: the teachers/trainers, the peer group, the family. Teachers/trainers can generally enhance both learning and creative abilities of their disabled student by using such a digital storytelling both as an exercise and as a mean to communicate; the peer group may find a common ground for communication, experience-sharing by digital-story sharing; the family can have a deeper insight of the feelings, the thoughts and the ability of their relative. All the indirect beneficiaries, and broader categories of people, can increase their awareness of the disabled youngster's personality and their empathy/understanding of the specific person and his/her condition.
Documentation and web resources useful to implement the scenario	• Video product of the workshop in Pescia, by Daniela: La mia scuola (My school) • The trainers' video: Vite stra-ordinarie: rileggere il quotidiano (Extra-ordinary lives: re-reading everyday life).