

The politics of PD: Workshop Submission

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INTRODUCTION

Members of the Participatory Design community often raise concerns about participation – participation in what, by whom, and for what purpose? While questions such as these are integral to participatory practice they are not always addressed explicitly, which I believe is a key source of our concern.

So we can be more deliberate about the decisions we make when designing, conducting and reflecting on participation, I decided to see whether there are some issues common across participatory practices. From this investigation, I derived the *Key Issues of Participation Framework*. In this position paper, I provide an extremely brief overview of the framework.

To ground the issues in experience, I also provide a brief overview of my PhD field research, which is currently underway. Using Participatory Action Research (PAR) as my approach, my co-researchers and I are reflecting on participation in the context of the Account Redesign project at the Toronto Public Library (TPL). Rather than trying to test or support the framework, I am using the framework as an input to the design of the research activities and expect to use it during the analysis as well.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CHOICES AND COMPROMISES

To derive the framework, I looked at Participatory Design as well as Participatory Democracy, Participatory Management, Participatory Education and Participatory Development. Like Participatory Design (PD), these practices share a commitment to participation, have roots in Participatory Action Research and continually grapple with the realities of practice.

I looked at these practices to uncover common issues of participation but also to identify strategies for addressing these issues and the questions they might help us answer for ourselves, our co-designers and recipients of our research. In the interests of brevity, I have left out the details of how I derived the seven issues that constitute the framework but, in brief below, I touch on each issue.

Goals, values and interests

From within Participatory Education, Anderson (1998) has identified four sources of inauthenticity regarding goals, values and interests that result in negative uses of participation: legitimization, control, collusion and distraction. Awareness of these issues can help us when we answer the question “**Why use participation?**”

Representation

Participatory Democracy has delved most deeply into issues of representation, in particular, regarding legitimate representation, accountability, advocacy and lobbying, rights education and awareness building, and political mobilization (Gaventa, 2004). We will need to keep these in mind when answering the question “**Who will participate?**” However, we will also need to look for issues not adequately tackled within Participatory Democracy such as local knowledge, participatory process, and direct and continuous participation (Gaventa, 2004).

Power Relations

Within Participatory Development, some practitioners are looking at using both fixed and fluid notions of power to understand and leverage existing social interactions with the goal of improving, rather than reversing, power relations (Masaki, 2004). We need to bear this in mind when we consider “**Who can participate freely?**”

Context

Participatory Design has been at the forefront of identifying the importance of context in the design and use of ICTs but less so the context for participation. Gaventa (2004) has suggested three spectrums for understanding the spatial aspects of context: space (closed, invited and claimed/created), place (arenas such as local, national and global) and power (visible, invisible and hidden). These are useful ideas to consider when we decide “**When and where will participation happen?**”

Transformations

Transformations of the participants (through mutual learning and skill development) as well as transformation of organizations and society more generally, were integral to Participatory Action Research and, by extension, the many participatory practices emanating from it. Therefore, it is no surprise that this goal remains paramount for many practitioners within a range of participatory practices and is sorely lamented when lacking from the goals or outcomes of participation (Anderson, 1998; Beck, 2002; Hickey and Mohan, 2004). When we are designing participation, we should ask “**Who will be changed by participation?**”

Effectiveness

Many people believe that participation leads to effectiveness: improved products, processes, productivity and satisfaction (McKeen, Guimaraes and Wetherbe, 1994). But effectiveness without transformations raises concerns within all the participatory practices reviewed.

We should bear this in mind when we ask: “**What will be effected by participation?**”

Sustainability

The concept of sustainability within participation is multi-faceted and still evolving. From my investigation, only Participatory Development and Participatory Design considered this issue and brought a couple of the facets to light: self-sustaining aspects of the product or process (Clement and van den Besselaar, 1993; Henry, 2004) and conscious balancing of utilization and protection of resources (Kensing and Simonsen, 1998). These would lead to a question like “**How will the outcomes of participation be sustained and sustainable?**”

While my examination of the seven issues is very preliminary, it has served the purposes I set out. Firstly, it provided a list of common issues to consider when designing, conducting, and reflecting on participation. Secondly, it identified some literatures within and beyond PD from which PD practitioners could draw upon to address these issues in their own practice.

EXPLORING PARTICIPATION THROUGH THE TPL ACCOUNT REDESIGN PROJECT

My PhD study has two levels: design activities associated with the TPL Account Redesign Project and research activities, which allow the co-researchers to reflect on participation in the design activities. Below I discuss completed and upcoming activities at both levels.

Design Activities

For the Account Redesign Project the design team, comprised of library staff and vendors, are using many techniques pioneered and refined by PD researchers and practitioners. To date, the design team has gathered requirements, designed collaboratively, and conducted design research using the following techniques:

- Discovery workshops
- Status meetings
- Collaborative design sessions and co-location
- Wireframes, mock-ups and electronic prototypes
- Email, Basecamp, Trello and GitHub messages
- Blog posts with comments by library members
- Usability testing with library members

In addition, the design team is planning a closed beta test with library members, gathering structured feedback about the user interfaces as well as information to help prioritize future features.

Research Activities

Eight members of the design team have agreed to contribute to Exploring Participation, a series of research activities in which the co-researchers reflect on their participation in the Account Redesign Project.

To date, we have had two key research activities: a workshop near the beginning of the project and a structured conversation mid-way through the project. The completed and planned research activities are discussed briefly discussed below.

Using The Consensus Workshop Method by ICA (Stanfield, 2002), which has many similarities to Future Workshops (Kensing and Madsen, 1991, McPhail, et al., 1998), the co-researchers worked individually, in small groups and then as one larger group to answer the focus question “How do we envision an ideal participation process for the Account Redesign Project?”.

Using the Focused Conversation Method by ICA (Stanfield, 2000), the PhD Candidate led a discussion addressing questions such as: Who are the participants on the Account Redesign Project? Who are the designers? How have library members been involved so far? How do you feel about involving library members in design?

In July 2014, I will conduct a workshop on the barriers to achieving our ideal participation process on this project, including a discussion of the implications on the process and outcome, as well as ways to overcome key barriers. Part of this discussion will focus on the limited involvement of library members.

In Fall 2014, my co-researchers and I will survey library members who contributed to the design through blog comments, usability or beta testing, in order to explore their thoughts and feelings about the forms and impacts of their involvement.

Also in Fall 2014, I will conduct interviews and/or survey library staff and vendors who contributed to the design through any of the design activities, gathering their thoughts on the participation process.

issues of Power and Participation

Through our research activities to date, we have shared stories about our past experiences of participation; envisioned an ideal participation process; and grounded our reflections in our experience on the Account Redesign Project. Below are some of the issues of participation we have churned up through these activities and are currently grappling with.

Design reviews vs. co-design

There are four roles on the user experience (UX) design team with specific responsibility for the design: UX designer/researcher (facilitation, sketches, wireframes and design research), graphic designer (visual mock-ups), front-end coder (HTML in the form of an electronic prototype) and subject-matter expert (representing and consulting TPL stakeholders and members). In addition, there is an “extended design team” that reviews the design artifacts, usually weekly.

Early in the project, sketches were created in collaborative design sessions that included some of the UX design team and some of the extended team. The sketches were then taken away by individuals on the UX design team to refine separately. This resulted in multiple design reviews and, sometimes, competing designs, rather than co-design. As the design progressed, the UX design team was able to work with a single shared artifact (the electronic prototype), which allowed everyone involved to contribute to the design in an ongoing way. While this worked better, other factors have sometimes hampered the momentum of the design.

Power relations

The relative power of the many players in this project has many dimensions. The design team consists of the manager and several other members of the TPL E-Services team, as well as several staff members from each of two vendor organizations, contracted separately. There are many other TPL stakeholders with varying degrees of power within TPL and within this project. Given the economic relation between TPL and the vendors, it would seem obvious that final decision-making regarding design lies with TPL, generally the manager of E-Services who represents the interests of the wider TPL stakeholder group – and this is true. However, lack of a stated approach to review and decision-making, and the manager's limited availability and attention for this project, made the decision-making precarious. While the team has been encouraged to speak freely throughout the process and has been able to affect decision-making through their design choices and their ability to support those choices, decisions continue to feel provisional even as the design draws to a close.

Participation by library members

Because the scope of the redesign was well known in terms of user needs and organizational constraints, we did not include any activities with library members that were intended to be generative.

User involvement to date has been mostly evaluative, including several rounds of usability testing and comments on design on TPL's web team blog. It has been challenging for the design team to envision how users would be involved in productive design activities, i.e. contributing directly to the wireframes, visual designs and emerging HTML prototype.

In the Focused Conversation, we discussed what some of the personal and organizational barriers are to including library members in design. Some people expressed regret that we had not, to this point, included one or more representative users on the core design team. We talked briefly about how this might work. Like other members of the UX design team, would the same person(s) contribute to collaborative design sessions weekly, be co-located with the design team two days per week, and provide feedback on our various online input channels between design sessions?

Another co-researcher was very frank about her concerns. First and foremost, she feels guilty that the Phase 1 rollout of the Account Redesign Project won't deliver the features most desired by users – and is already bracing for the backlash.

She also does not want to put users in the position of solving user interface problems that arise because of TPL policy. As one of the subject matter experts, she often provides a reality check for the design team about what can be accomplished within the constraints of the organization, such as policy decisions, technical limitations, and available resources. Being cast as an apologist for TPL with library members is fraught with discomfort and risk. This points to a larger issue of organizational readiness to prioritize user needs in order

to find the will and resources to overcome organizational barriers.

She also recalled the not-so-good-old-days of “design-by-committee” when her TPL colleagues (none of whom are employed as designers) would provide detailed input into the user experience design. This resulted in designs that were influenced by group dynamics and were ultimately not successful.

Finally, she mentioned that if the design-development-implementation system at TPL were more agile and flexible, making it easy to test and modify design choices, involving end users in design would feel more comfortable. However, as it is now, TPL has to live with its design choices for a long period of time, even if they have evidence that they are flawed.

CONCLUSION

As mentioned, I will be conducting a follow-up workshop in July with my co-researchers to further explore the obstacles to achieving our ideal participation process, including barriers to greater involvement of library members. I believe the new insights generated at this workshop, the work done to date on this project, as well as the *Key Issues of Participation Framework* will be useful in discussions of the questions posed for the *Analyzing the politics of PD: a conceptual investigation* workshop. I would welcome the opportunity to be part of what is sure to be a lively day of conversation.

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