ABSTRACT

Users should participate in information technology (IT) artifact development, but it has proven to be challenging. This applies also in the open source software (OSS) development. This chapter critically examines discursive construction of user participation in academic literatures and in practice, in IT artifact development. First three academic discourses constructing user participation are discussed. Then the discursive construction of user participation is explored in OSS development literature. Afterwards, results from several empirical, interpretive case studies are outlined. Some of them have been carried out in the IT artifact product development organizations, others in the OSS development context. Clear similarities can be identified in the discourses constructing user participation in these divergent IT artifact development contexts. The academic discourses on user participation clearly also legitimate certain ways of constructing user participation in practice. The OSS development literature bears resemblance mainly with the Human Computer Interaction (HCI) discourse on user participation. Therefore, it is argued that especially the HCI community should carefully reflect on what kinds of discourses on user participation it advocates and deems as legitimate.

Keywords: FLOSS, Human Computer Interaction (HCI), Open Source

INTRODUCTION

This paper critically examines discursive construction of user participation in academia and in practice - in information technology (IT) artifact development. User participation refers to users’ participative activities including “both formal and informal, direct and indirect, and active and passive activities, performed alone or with others” (Barki & Hartwick, 1994, pp. 61). Specific attention is paid to open source software (OSS) development context, which has been acknowledged as a relevant development context both in Information Systems (IS) and Human Computer Interaction (HCI) research (Andreasen et al. 2006, Cetin et al 2007, Fitzgerald 2006, Niederman et al 2006, Nichols & Twidale, 2003; Zhao & Deek 2006). Characteristic to OSS development is that the source code needs to be “available for anyone
who wants to use or modify it”, even though due to differences in the licensing agreements, there actually is a “continuum of openness” (Niederman et al. 2006: 131).

OSS development context has also been considered a challenging context from the viewpoint of user participation. User population of OSS is becoming larger, including a growing number of non-technical, non computer professional users, who are not interested in OSS development, but only in the resulting solution (Cetin et al. 2007, Franke & von Hippel 2003, Frishberg et al. 2002, Nichols & Twidale 2006, Niederman et al. 2006, Scacchi 2002, Viorres et al. 2007, Ye & Kishida 2003). From the point of view of these users, usability of OSS tends to be poor, and the development process anything but ‘user centered’ (Andreasen et al. 2006, Benson et al. 2004, Bodker et al. 2007, Cetin et al. 2007, Feller & Fitzgerald 2000, Nichols & Twidale 2006, Twidale & Nichols 2005, Zhao & Deek 2005, Zhao & Deek 2006).

This paper adopts a critical poststructuralist approach informed by Foucaultian tradition for the analysis of discourses on user participation in IT artifact development. This approach has been discussed more thoroughly in Iivari (2006). This paper relies on that description. This paper critically examines discourses on user participation. Regarding the construction of user participation in research, it has been argued that user participation is a very vague concept and there is a variety of views of what user participation is, and how it should be accomplished (e.g. Asaro, 2000; Barki & Hartwick, 1994).

The influential role of academic communities in imposing meanings and ‘truths’ to the social world has been recognized (Cooper & Bowers, 1995; Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 1997; Finken, 2003; Weedon, 1987). Some studies (Cooper & Bowers, 1995; Finken, 2003) have already examined HCI and participatory design (PD) traditions in the Foucaultian spirit as discourses constructing their objects of study (e.g. the users and the user interface, UI) in particular ways and at the same time legitimizing their existence. This paper continues their work, but adds new insights by reviewing more recent literature and by incorporating an OSS development perspective in the analysis.

Regarding user participation in practice, existing literature has warned that user participation may be used only as a buzzword or a weapon for achieving surprising or even paradoxical ends (Beath & Orlikowski, 1994, Catarci et al., 2002; Hirschheim & Newman, 1991; Howcroft & Wilson, 2003; Kirsch & Beath, 1996; Nielsen, 1999; O’Connor 1995, Robey & Markus, 1984; Symon, 1998). Some studies on discourses (e.g. Alvarez, 2002; Bloomfield & Vurdubakis, 1997; Nielsen, 1999; Sarkkinen & Karsten, 2005) have already analyzed discourses in IT artifact development, criticizing them for mainly reinforcing management agendas and goals. However, there is a clear lack of both empirical studies and studies on discourses on user participation in the challenging OSS development context. Therefore, this paper takes a step towards filling this gap by utilizing a poststructuralist approach informed by Foucauldian tradition. This approach has also gained increasing attention in IS research during recent years, and empirical studies on discourses relying on Foucaultian tradition have proliferated (e.g. Doolin, 1999; Iivari 2006, Sayer & Harvey, 1997; Wynn et al. 2003), even though none of them address discourses on user participation in the challenging OSS development context.

The paper is organized as follows. The next section introduces the poststructuralist approach utilized in this paper. The third section identifies academic discourses on user participation in IS and HCI literatures. In addition, OSS development literature is reviewed from the viewpoint of user participation. The fourth section presents discourses on user participation identified in interpretive case studies in the IT artifact product development context. In addition, results from interpretive case studies in OSS development context (see Iivari 2008a, Iivari 2008b, Iivari, Hedberg & Kirves 2008) are compared to the results. The discourses identified from the empirical material are also related to the wider discursive field in which the academic IS and HCI communities participate and contribute.
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