Issues of Participation: A Framework for Choices and Compromises

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ABSTRACT

Members of the Participatory Design (PD) community often raise concerns about participation—participation in what, by whom, and for what purpose? To help determine and answer questions important to participatory practice, the author derived a framework of key issues of participation using literature from Participatory Design and related practices such as Participatory Action Research, Participatory Democracy and Participatory Development. The key issues are: values, representation, power relations, context, transformations, effectiveness, and sustainability. The author posits that giving attention to these issues when designing, conducting and reflecting on participation will improve participatory practices by making choices and compromises more explicit to those involved in the research as well as those who review the research results. The paper discusses how the author derived the framework and then uses the selected literature to explore each of the seven issues and how they can be addressed in participatory practice in general, and within PD more specifically.

Keywords: Co-Design, Context, Effectiveness, Participatory Action Research (PAR), Participatory Design, Power Relations, Representation, Sustainability, Transformations, Values

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.

To better understand participation and the choices we make while designing, conducting and reflecting on participation, I decided to see whether there are some issues common across participatory practices. 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.

In addition to these commonalities, these participatory practices share particular relationships to Participatory Design. PD’s original focus on workplace democracy makes links to Participatory Democracy and Participatory Management perhaps most clear. As PD has moved outside the workplace, links to Participatory Education and Participatory Development have emerged. There have been wonderful
cases of PD in a development context (Dearden & Rizvi, 2008a; Puri, Byrne, Nhampossa, & Quraishi, 2004). In addition, Dearden and Rizvi (2008b) have provided a rich comparison of Participatory Design and Participatory Development and how they might be used together.

In international development, participation moved from the margins to the mainstream during the 1980s (Hickey & Mohan, 2004). Through the 1990s, a backlash built and in 2001, a collection of articles was published entitled Participation: The New Tyranny. Focusing on Participatory Rural Assessment (PRA) – a specific form of participatory development – the provocatively titled volume criticized, in particular, the descent of PRA into a technical approach, failing to engage issues of power and politics. This failure echoed similar concerns within PD. However, help seemed to be at hand in the form of a response book entitled Participation: From Tyranny to Transformation. Rather than refuting the first book, the editors of the second book, Hickey and Mohan, agree with the key underlying concern about issues of power and politics. Still committed to participatory approaches, the authors in this volume try to tackle these issues directly, mostly through thoughtful reflections on their own practices, including trying to draw on and create relevant theory.

In the introduction to the book, Hickey & Mohan identify a series of “thematic priorities” that “contemporary approaches to participation must engage in order to (re)constitute participation as a viable and legitimate approach within development” (2004, p. 13). The priorities they identify – transformation, temporal and spatial aspects, and representation – became the beginning of the issues I address in this paper. While not stated explicitly as “thematic priorities”, values and power relations underlie the discussion of all of their other priorities and I have chosen to identify these as separate issues. Finally, I added two more issues that were understated in the Hickey and Mohan chapter but surfaced within other contexts, in particular within PD. The first I’ve termed “effectiveness” to encompass attempts to improve the end-product, productivity, the process, and participants’ ownership of the product and process. The final issue I examine is sustainability, encompassing several definitions of that concept as well.

The paper begins with some definitions of participation drawn from PD as well as the other participatory literatures reviewed, followed by my exploration of the issues of participation within these fields. Thereafter, I look at the seven issues that form the Key Issues of Participation Framework I derived. The first four issues permeate participatory endeavours from beginning to end: values (goals, values and interests), representation, power relations and context. While the last three issues are also present throughout, they focus more specifically on the outcomes: transformations, effectiveness and sustainability. In the conclusion, I discuss how the issues of participation outlined in this paper can be of assistance in identifying the choices that we make as PD practitioners and how we can make those more explicit.

Throughout this paper I use the term “participants” to include all of the people who participate in the participatory process – researchers, designers, developers, the people intended to use the system (for which I’ve used the terms “users” and “end-users” interchangeably) as well as other stakeholders (such as company or organization representatives).

DEFINING PARTICIPATION

Looking at the etymology of the word “participation”, it means “to take part” (participation, n.d.). However layered on top of this basic definition are many ideas about the forms and issues of participation. Perhaps the most familiar and well-considered form of participation is democracy – although the definition of democracy goes further than “to take part”. According to its etymology, its basic meaning is “common people rule” (democracy, n.d.), which defines who is participating and the form of their participation. Taking these basic definitions as a starting place, I use other definitions

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