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”

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 pro-
fessional 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 he
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 participa-
tion in IT artifact development. This approach
has been discussed more thoroughly in Livari
(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 par-
ticipation 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 Foucauldian 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 par-
ticipation 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 manage-
ment agendas and goals. However, there is a
clear lack of both empirical studies and studies
on discourses on user participation in the chal-
lenging 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; Livari 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 develop-
ment literature is reviewed from the viewpoint
of user participation. The fourth section presents
discourses on user participation identified in
empirical case studies in the IT artifact product
development context. In addition, results from
interpretive case studies in OSS development
context (see Livari 2008a, Livari 2008b, Livari,
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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