

THE VALUE OF DESIGN RESEARCH

WHO NEEDS US? INQUIRING INTO THE PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES OF OTHERS AND WHAT THEY MEAN FOR PARTICIPATORY DESIGNERS

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we look at participatory practices performed by others, that is, those not directly engaged in the field of participatory design, and address the question of whether we — participatory design researchers and practitioners — are still necessary. By attempting to understand what others do, we hope to better understand and articulate our own participatory practice and our role in the future. Our findings show that participatory designers are, in fact, still needed, even in contexts where other participatory practitioners play a more central role; it is important that we learn from and collaborate with those other practitioners.

Keywords: participatory design, workshops, methods, practices

1 INTRODUCTION

Participatory design methodologies have, thus far, focused mostly on activities staged by expert design practitioners or by design researchers in specific contexts, such as organizations, industry, and planning and governance. The purpose of those activities is largely to enable a variety of stakeholders to take part in the process of designing products or services through ideation and conceptualization (see e.g. Sanders & Stappers 2012; Hultcranz & Ibrahim 2002). The outcomes of the participatory activities are then used by designers as seeds for further design and development. The field of participatory design has generated a great deal of knowledge on the components of participatory design activities, especially on the tools and techniques they involve. However, as Light & Akama (2012) point out, not enough research has been done on how designers and design researchers put participation into practice.

When designers are the ones engaging in participatory design, they act as both facilitators and instigators of the design project. Expert designers are not the only ones, though, that undertake participatory activities. Many others — among them citizen activists, community artists, and researchers in other disciplines — make use of similar techniques for engaging participants (e.g. Wardale 2008; Kolschoten et al 2007). Thanks to our observations and involvement in participatory activities related to the urban environment and cultural heritage of Helsinki (see e.g. Salgado 2009; Saad-Sulonen 2014), we have been able to identify participatory activities similar in spirit to the ones we foster, mainly in the form of participatory workshops. The engines and leaders of those activities are, in most cases, people who don't consider themselves designers, design researchers, or participatory urban planners. They envision themselves, rather,

as community activists or artists, or facilitators in training from a variety of backgrounds. Our observations and casual interactions with these practitioners

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led us to formulate the question: who needs participatory designers if others are already doing the job?

In this paper, we ask the following: What can design researchers learn from others involved in organizing participatory activities? How can design researchers collaborate with those individuals? To answer these questions, we interviewed six Helsinki-based participatory practitioners currently active in different fields. We approached them with a set of questions inspired by our own practice as participatory design researchers; in the interviews, we focused on workshops as an umbrella activity. The results show that, in relation to staging participatory activities, we could learn from other practitioners in order to better define and develop our participatory practices. We could also potentially collaborate with other participatory practitioners as a way to save resources and to communicate best practices, to say nothing of addressing problems like the sustainability of participation over time.

2 PARTICIPATORY ACTIVITIES AS PRACTICED BY DESIGN RESEARCHERS

While participatory approaches stand at the center of activist and citizen movements and are fairly widespread in fields like art and community work, we focus here on participatory design, because it is the approach that has framed our own practice. Participatory design is “an emerging design practice that involves different non-designers in various co-design activities throughout the design process” (Sanders et al. 2010; p.195) in order to influence the design outcome. The palette of participatory-design tools and techniques¹ is currently quite varied; it includes 2D collages, 3D mockups, cards, scenario building, envisioning with props (clay, Lego, wooden blocks, puppets), customer journeys, actor maps, blueprints, visualizations, dramatization, enacting use situations with prototypes or mockups, and design games (Ehn, et al. 1996; Buchenau & Suri 2000; Sanders et al. 2010; Brand et al. 2013). As the format in which participatory activities are staged and the site where different tools and techniques are deployed, workshops are central to participatory design.

Specific types of workshops have been developed for use in design. Future Workshops —introduced by Jungk and Müllert in the 70s (1987) — are a useful technique for engaging citizens in creating new ideas and solutions for social problems. Future Workshops were further refined in the 90s in the context of participatory information-system design (Kensing & Madsen 1991). Other types of workshops used by designers include contextual and envisionment workshops (see, for instance, Hulcrantz & Ibrahim 2002, Huybrechts et al. 2012).

¹ According to Bratteteig, et al (2013, p.119), “methods [in participatory design] include which types of users (and stakeholders in general) to include; how to involve users in core activities; how to resolve conflicting views on the functionality and/or form of the products. The techniques typically explain how to go about carrying out specific activities, while the tools are concrete instruments supporting the techniques”.

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Regardless of specific type, participatory design workshops always consist of face-to-face sessions held in environments familiar to participants (their school, home, workplace, etc.) or in spaces provided by the design researchers. Workshops can combine individual activities with others geared to small and large groups. Participatory design researchers and practitioners act as facilitators of participatory workshops. Participants are considered "expert informants" or even "co-designers" capable of enriching the design process by formulating or evaluating ideas (Sanders & Stappers 2008).

The workshop format is useful for design and design researchers in many different ways. According to Ehn and his colleagues (1996, p.148), "For the organization as a whole the workshop serves as training in co-operation and decision-making. As such, it can be the beginning of a new way to carry out development work. The change in rules and the distance from daily routine and milieu serve as facilitators."

On the basis of our own practice as design researchers, we have identified the following components as key to the workshop as participatory technique: 1) establishing aims, 2) inviting and recruiting participants, 3) choosing appropriate tools and techniques, 4) facilitating, 5) documenting and collecting feedback from participants, 6) assessing, and 7) making use of the outcomes (e.g. integrating them into design processes and communicating them). These components are usually formulated by design researchers. They indicate the dual nature of the design researcher as someone who, on the one hand, uses certain traditional tools of qualitative scientific research (permission forms, etc.) and, on the other, acts as a translator of what participants have expressed and a facilitator of participatory activities (Sanders & Stappers 2008). Design researchers produce research artifacts that can be used in industry (Zimmerman et al. 2007) and in academic papers aimed at peers. We will discuss which of the aforementioned components continue to be relevant when participation is initiated and conducted by others and how, in those cases, they are enacted.

3 EMPIRICAL INQUIRY INTO PARTICIPATORY ACTIVITIES AS PRACTICED BY OTHERS

Our empirical research consists of interviews with six persons involved in organizing participatory activities, mainly workshops related to shaping the urban environment or public services in Helsinki. The individuals interviewed were a community artist, a local activist in a neighbourhood association, an intern at a city-run youth center, a designer of alternative reality games who is also a member of a performing arts collective, a researcher working on health services, and an architect who defines himself as "a facilitator with a background in architecture".

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As this is a preliminary study, we wanted to select people active in participatory activities from a wide range of backgrounds and with different experiences, but who do not identify themselves as participatory designers and have not been trained as such, even though they might be designers. We nonetheless restricted our interviews to people operating in contexts similar to those where we operate as participatory design researchers.

The interviews were semi-structured; the activities we had identified pursuant to our work in participatory practices constituted the main topics of discussion.

3.1 INSTIGATION AND AIMS

The interviewees were, for the most part, the instigators of the participatory activities they facilitated. Whereas, in the case of design researchers, the aims and motivations of participatory activities are usually defined in terms of more or less concrete outcomes, often related to the development of better products or services, here the aims and motivation of some of the interviewees were different. For the community artist, for example, the aim is "to produce an encounter with the other." In this case, the focus is on the change that the encounter might be capable of producing in individuals rather than on how the materials collected could be useful beyond the specific encounter. For others though, the aims and motivations were, similar as for participatory designers, to collect material to be used to influence a design process in a near future.

3.2 INVITING AND RECRUITING PARTICIPANTS

In the cases reported by the interviewees, invitations to take part in the workshops were open and participants did not need to register or pay a fee. There was no pre-selection of participants and in only one case did participants receive any compensation for taking part in the workshops.

As tends to be the case with participatory activities, participants are usually active citizens, the most vocal members of a community. Reaching out to other members of a community requires special effort and advertising (see e.g. Salgado & Galanakis 2014) and there is no guarantee that enough people will show up. Some of the interviewees had direct contacts with people in the community, which can be helpful when it comes to recruiting participants. Notwithstanding, because of their role as activists or facilitators they are not seen as just ordinary residents, which means they often face the same challenges as designers when it comes to recruiting participants.

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For many of the interviewees, a lack of resources complicated access to infrastructure (e.g. space for holding the workshops, materials, refreshments, etc.), which means that existing community infrastructure is key.

3.3 TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

Though many of the interviewees had organized more than one workshop, in the interviews we focused on a representative case. The themes of the workshops described were: neighborhood plans and dreams (the activist, community artist, and city worker had worked with this theme, though not together as they did not know about each other's activities); urban utopias (the game designer/performing artist); immigrants and well-being (the researcher); urban planning (the architect/facilitator). Participatory design tools and techniques, including mapping techniques, were among those interviewees used. General collaborative techniques and tools were used as well, including discussions and brainstorming sessions guided by a facilitator. In some cases, the tools and techniques chosen reflected the personal interests of the interviewee: the game designer/performance artist used "perception" exercises in an outdoor workshop where the aim was to get participants to change their perception of reality.

3.4 FACILITATING

Like many participatory designers, the interviewees did not have specific training as facilitators. They built their expertise on experience. Some of them had conducted more than thirty workshops, whereas others were in the process of organizing their first one. Some had a clear understanding of their role as facilitator, which — in the case of the architect/facilitator — was even the basis for individual identity. Approaches to facilitating differed from case to case. Some preferred to stick to specific tasks, questions, and activities, whereas others were more flexible. The architect/facilitator, for instance, tries to strike a balance between giving participants enough space and staying focused in order to get outcomes that can realistically inform architecture and urban design. For the game designer/performance artist, a facilitator is also a performer, along with the participants, in a staged game that adds another dimension to reality. Here, the role of the facilitator, which is constantly changing, is vital to the development of the workshop. The local activist had a more flexible approach to the role of facilitator. She had planned one specific task for a workshop (annotating a map with one's dreams) but, since it took participants longer than expected to introduce themselves, that ended up changing: participants were allowed to shape the agenda of the workshop as it unfolded. This worked well in this case because one of the aims of the workshop was to get to know new residents.

Whereas some of the facilitators worked on their own, others had support from a wider team. The way different roles are allocated is important to the development of participatory activities. Workshop participants have a role to

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play by, for instance, motivating others and influencing the tone of the discussion. The youth center intern reported that two city workers from her organization and one resident who took part in all the workshops proved key to enlivening the sessions and ensuring continuity over the series of workshops.

3.1 DOCUMENTATION, COLLECTING FEEDBACK, ASSESSMENT, AND MAKING USE OF OUTCOMES

Documenting participatory workshops and collecting feedback from participants are key components of participatory design as they provide the material that will be assessed in producing results. This was not the case for the practitioners interviewed, even though some of the tangible material produced in the workshops (e.g. maps) was compiled. The materials were not necessarily photographed or digitized, nor was there systematic documentation of the activities.

The architect/facilitator used the materials produced to draw architectural plans after each session and asked residents to comment on them. The local activist made a mood board after the workshop showing some ideas related to the development of the park that had emerged during the workshop. These outcomes entail later engagement of the ideas and content of the workshops on the part of practitioners and, as such, they constitute acts of interpretation and the formulation of solutions.

The only interviewee who documented the workshops and analyzed that documentation in a more systematic fashion was, logically, the researcher. During the sessions, she and her colleagues took notes, which they then sent to the participants via e-mail. Some of the participants sent feedback, which led the researcher to adjust her notes — a good participatory research practice that ensures that researchers and facilitators do not misunderstand informants.

For most, though, systematic documentation and analysis were not relevant. The focus of the community artist was a situated encounter with participants and the personal enrichment that a workshop could yield. In a sense, the goals she sets for her workshops are more enduring; the goals of a workshop led by a design researcher are much more concrete and short term.

In the case of the local activist, the concrete materials yielded by a workshop are not necessarily the only way that the ideas and outcomes of a workshop can influence the neighborhood and its future activities. As a member of the community, she is active—sometimes unknowingly—in communicating the outcomes of participatory activities. She is, in this sense, what Wardale (2008) calls an “internal facilitator.”

Workshops were seldom documented with photos or audiovisual recordings. Some of the interviewees thought that such recordings might disrupt the atmosphere of the workshop. Some have not considered how such documentation might be used in the future and they prefer to concentrate on the situation at hand. There seems to be a correlation between the lack of

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audiovisual documentation and the fact that most of these practitioners do not engage in a systematic analysis of the materials gathered.

Regarding feedback, some practitioners asked for collective feedback from participants while others asked for individual feedback. Not all the interviewees documented the feedback collected.

4 LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Participatory design researchers and practitioners focus on the concrete outcomes of the participatory activities that they themselves stage. Producing tangible outcomes and documenting sessions is a goal in and of itself since that material, and its subsequent analysis, has design implications. On the basis of our interviews with the community artist and the game designer/performance artist, it would appear that participatory design researchers pay less attention to the actual encounter with the participant. By focusing excessively on how to collect and use data, we might be missing the richness of the moment itself and lose sight of the personal and social learning taking place.

We can also learn from other practitioners about setting the goals of participatory activities. The aim of the community artist, for example, was to provide a space for the personal enrichment of workshop participants; on the basis of that personal enrichment, they might, in the future, be able to affect the city. The game designer/performance artist put it this way: "The idea is to change the person, not the city, because the person is the city." The timeframe of the goals of participation are, then, much longer than in design or R&D projects. As participatory designers, we should bear in mind goals of this sort and the benefits they provide.

5 WORKING WITH OTHERS

There is no need for participatory designers to be, in all instances, the ones at the forefront of staging participatory activities. They could contribute to participatory activities instigated or staged by others by providing their expertise in, for instance, the documentation and analysis of such activities — a component often neglected, as described above, when the goals and/or procedures of the participatory activities are not strictly defined or when outcomes are intended to support communities or self-organized groups rather than companies. Research-based practices could support the work of communities and of less experienced participatory practitioners. At the same

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time, adapting our documentation and analysis practices to new contexts could help us move beyond the confines of academia and traditional design-project settings. Practitioners working on similar issues or in the same setting would benefit from access to each other's findings, documentation, and experiences. Creating local repositories of tools, techniques, best practices, as well as materials gathered and analyzed might be a way to work in this direction.

All practitioners, including design researchers, should be more aware that data gathered in participatory sessions might be useful in other situations and stages and to other interested parties. We should all save, share, and generate metadata of the raw material gathered during participatory activities and store them in permanent databases. Data gathered in these workshops can be interpreted in different ways depending on practitioners' interest and expertise. Standardizing procedures for collecting data and documenting workshops could be important to future research, citizen activism, and artistic endeavors.

Integrating participatory activities initiated by others is relevant when working with communities, particularly when those communities contain members already organizing and facilitating participatory activities. This convergence would blur the boundaries between those of us who are professional facilitators/organizers and participants, which in turn would heighten our sensitivities to the different layers of interpretation of a given participatory activity. By considering who initiates, participates in, and benefits from participatory activities, as well as the goals that we, or others, set (Vines et al. 2013), we are able to re-articulate our roles and acknowledge our limitations, ideally teaming up with others to overcome them.

This does not mean that it is no longer relevant for us designers to stage activities ourselves, but it is important to consider different alternatives according to the situation. Staging our own activities might make sense when we need to build a rapport with participants that starts at the invitation phase and slowly develops over the course of the participatory sessions. That rapport might be beneficial for sustaining the collaboration in future stages of the design process.

Finally, the issue of the sustainability of participation beyond designer-staged activities has been widely discussed (see e.g. Botero & Saad-Sulonen 2013). By developing tools and practices for collaboration with other practitioners and with active members of communities, we might ensure more sustained forms of participation and greater collaboration over time.

6 CONCLUSIONS

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This research was triggered by the sense that many other practitioners were treading on our toes as participatory design practitioners and researchers. Initiating and staging participatory activities, in particular workshops, seems to have become popular. Hence, we found ourselves wondering if we are still needed. Pursuant to interviews with a series of participatory practitioners in Helsinki and an analysis of their practices, we can affirm that we are, in fact, still needed. What we must do, however, is re-articulate our roles, especially in new contexts such as community self-organizations and citizen activism, where others play a leading role in orchestrating participation.

The interviews evidenced that other participatory practitioners don't necessarily operate in all the contexts where participatory design researchers and practitioners are most active (e.g. informing organizations, industry, R&D). One shared terrain, though, is participatory activities geared to communities or groups of citizen. In those cases, our research shows that we can learn from other practitioners and that we should collaborate with them. Specifically, we can learn to better value encounters with participants as they take place and to set longer term goals. As participatory design researchers and practitioners, we also recommend devising new collaboration configurations with other participatory practitioners. We can contribute our expertise in the documentation and analysis of workshops and in the communication of the material generated or collected. By collaborating with others, we will be better equipped to engage in participatory design for and with communities (DiSalvo et al. 2013) and to address the challenges of enabling sustainable participation.

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