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P for pragmatic: A note relating to Beck's concern for work place democracy, arguing for IT design skills to become part of public education

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A note relating to Beck's concern for work place democracy, arguing for IT design skills to become part of public education

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Abstract

It is argued that both the demand on professional IT designers to be able to live democracy and the demand on IT end users to be able to design presents a challenge to the public educational system: IT design skills have to become part of the common standard curriculum!

Keywords

democracy,IT design, design education.

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P for pragmatic

What is (work place) democracy? In lack of a better answer, I will just express what has become a belief of mine, having been part of the Scandinavian tradition in systems development for almost twenty years: Democracy is situated, it is a habit, a way of life where you are prepared to listen, to contribute by expressing your own viewpoints, to accept criticism, but hold on to the arguments that you believe still stand. Democracy is not something you can give to others, or design for them to have. A group has as much democracy as its members live.

Is democracy good? It certainly does not fill you stomach when you are hungry. However, participating in a democratic dialogue, with all its difficulties, anger, and joy, gives you a sense of dignity, which is hard to describe for those who have not experienced it, but equally hard to give up, once you have become accustomed to it.

How can designers live democracy? I would say, it is difficult for designers not to, in the sense that design ideas have to be put out there, criticized, shared, and often transferred from one community and one medium to other communities and other media. But is it possible for designers to inspire democratic living in communities of users? Bonnie A. Nardi has, in her book 'A Small Matter of Programming' presented 'end user computing' as an answer to that question, but it takes education to master computing to end user level. So both the demand on professional designers to be able to live democracy and the demand on end users to be able to design presents a challenge to the public educational system: IT design skills have to become part of the common standard curriculum!

I take teaching of IT-design skills to be the greatest challenge to public education today, and I chose the headline 'P for pragmatic' for this note in honor of the tradition of John Dewey, but also of Karl Marx, who both claims that intellectual insight is the fruit of practical experience. The materiality of IT is more multi-facetted than that of a chair, but since design in some sense is an anthropological primitive: humans can not help trying to bring order to their life, teaching design is more a matter of cultivating an ability already existing, a parallel to language education, in fact. Design education should be pragmatic in the sense that students should be exposed to the consequences of the realization of their ideas, they should learn to question ideas in a way that opens new problem spaces, and they should learn the joy of being a team player.

Design education today is problem-based and project-organized, but do designers undergo the consequences of their own designs, in school, or later, during their professional career? Do designers dare to take the time and effort to think different? Is the professional role model a hero like Linus Thorvald or … what does a designer team player really look like, personified?

I am going to end this short note with a quote from a great team player in IT-design, Bonnie A. Nardi. In the introduction to the book, where she coined the term 'gardener' (a local developer who are given recognition, time and resources for pursuing local developer activities) she writes: 'We may indeed want to turn over some functions to computer agents, but let us also open up the world of programming to end users. As has been shown time and again, no matter how much designers and programmers try to anticipate and provide for what users will need, the effort always falls short because it is impossible to know in advance what may be needed.' (Nardi, 1993, p.3)

The professional team player designer should know how to make the grass grow, but society should through public education cultivate good grass seeds.

References

Nardi, B.A. *Small Matter of Programming*. MIT Press, 1993.