

Summer 6-30-2010

## Introduction the debate section: A short review to the past and present of participatory design

Susanne Bødker

*University of Aarhus, bodker@cs.au.dk*

Samuli Pekkola

*Tampere University of Technology, Finland, samuli.pekkola@tut.fi*

Follow this and additional works at: <http://aisel.aisnet.org/sjis>

---

### Recommended Citation

Bødker, Susanne and Pekkola, Samuli (2010) "Introduction the debate section: A short review to the past and present of participatory design," *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*: Vol. 22 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <http://aisel.aisnet.org/sjis/vol22/iss1/4>

This material is brought to you by the Journals at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact [elibrary@aisnet.org](mailto:elibrary@aisnet.org).

# A short review to the past and present of participatory design

## Introduction to debate section

Susanne Bødker  
University of Aarhus, Denmark  
[bodker@cs.au.dk](mailto:bodker@cs.au.dk)

Samuli Pekkola  
Tampere University of Technology, Finland  
[samuli.pekkola@tut.fi](mailto:samuli.pekkola@tut.fi)

Participatory design is a long-lived tradition of systems design with active user participation in Scandinavia and elsewhere. The tradition has its roots in the work of Kristen Nygaard and Olav-Terje Bergo with the Norwegian Iron and Metal Workers Union in the 1970s. This era was characterized by a highly political focus, and a fierce debate with the sociotechnical design tradition. The Norwegian approach inspired other projects, such as the Demos project in Sweden and the DUE project in Denmark, and at the late 1970s, the Nordic UTOPIA project, through which the focus of research and design was moved from political debate and local union work to constructive design of technological alternatives with and for future users. In parallel, the researchers from this tradition worked to more specifically address the methods and work settings of professional systems developers.

With the UTOPIA project came a focus on design methodology emphasizing the active collaboration between users and designers; an approach that caught significant attention outside Scandinavia, particularly in North America. The move was famously phrased in Liam Bannon's paper: "From human factors to human actors" (Bannon 1991). This paper was a part of Joan Greenbaum and Morten Kyng's *Design at Work* (1991) writing project, connecting researchers from the Scandinavian and North American scene. At the same time Participatory Design Conference series was initiated by Lucy Suchman and others. In addition to internationalization, participatory design drew a growing attention across research disciplines, starting from Human-

Computer Interaction, diversifying and finding its ways into Information Systems, and into the emerging field of Computer Supported Cooperative Work.

In the 1990s there was a strong push by Scandinavian funding agencies and researchers to make participatory design even more useful in research projects that had direct collaboration with commercial partners. This opened up and tightened cooperation with commercial partners. However, at the same time the fundamentals of participatory design changed. Participatory design was, and is, often seen as an approach to systems design most suited for work settings, and indeed this is where it has its roots. However, it has been challenged by more recent research that addresses the use of technologies in different settings and means of participation of users, also in non-work settings (cf., Iivari 2007; Iivari et al. 2010).

The pace of technological development and the changes in organizational environment have had an impact also on participatory design approach. For example the 2008 Participatory Design Conference had papers on large-scale systems (Simonsen and Herzum 2008), community design (Karasti & Baker 2008), participatory organizations (Jones 2008) and urban planning (Nuojua et al. 2008), among many others. Also a recent SJIS special issue on distributed participatory design demonstrated the means and challenges of conducting distributed research and design (cf., SJIS 2009).

The diversifying outside of its traditional has dispersed the participatory design approach. The term has gained different connotations, and different communities do not necessarily share the same publication outlets—this resembles the development of HCI field (cf. Grudin 2006). User participation, nevertheless, has become more important than ever, and the need for interdisciplinary debate and knowledge sharing remains.

Even though participatory design has a fundamental characteristic of being close the users, it has been used only for small scale projects (e.g., Oostveen & van den Besselaar 2004). This is slightly surprising as systems development projects regularly fail in meeting the user requirements (cf. Hansen et al. 2008) and as research communities regularly debate about the relevance of their research (Ramiller et al. 2008; Baskerville & Myers 2009; Gill & Bhattacharjee 2009). Yet participatory design would solve these problems as, by default, by so doing it is possible to gain in-depth understanding about the future users and their needs. This inevitably makes it easier to understand the user and the use context—either for developing better systems or for conducting more relevant research.

There is also another issue related to the researchers' work. As Mathiassen and Nielsen (2008) stated, ever more dominating publish or perish trend has had an impact on Scandinavian IS tradition. As action research is endangered (see also Simonsen 2009), also the researchers' interest, means, and opportunities of conducting longitudinal and intensive research by using participatory design approach might be at risk. In order to cope with contradictory forces of publishing regularly, conducting longitudinal and rigor research, and working with commercial partners in different settings sets new requirements for participatory design as a method, as an approach, and as a philosophy.

The author of the debate article, Morten Kyng, has made his journey with the participatory design tradition from the very beginning. He has played a significant role in each step: He was initiator and one of the main researchers of the DUE and the Utopia projects, and he played a significant role in spreading the ideas of participatory design from Scandinavia to the rest of the world, through the so-called Aarhus conferences and their proceedings (1985, 1995 and 2005),

through the *Design at Work* book, and his keynote lectures at PDC 1994 and CHI (with Joan Greenbaum 1995). He went on to take a leading role in providing new funding schemes for collaboration between research and industry, and has now returned to university research where he heads a centre focusing on health and care technologies, with participating users outside classical work settings. His debate article highlights different elements of participatory design, their historical roots and current states, and presents participatory design for the future: the next practices of participatory design. This view is challenged by the debate forum commentators Dan Shapiro, Ellen Balka and Helena Karasti in their articles. Enjoy the debate forum.

## 1 References

- Bannon, L., (1991). From human factors to human actors. In: *Design at work*, J. Greenbaum and M. Kyng, editors, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale.
- Baskerville, R. and Myers, M. D., (2009). Fashion waves in information systems research and practice. *MIS Quarterly*, (33:4): 647-662.
- Gill, G. and Bhattacharjee, A., (2009). Whom are we informing? Issues and recommendations for MIS research from an informing science perspective. *MIS Quarterly*, (33:2): 217-235.
- Greenbaum, J. and Kyng, M., editors, (1991). *Design at Work*, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Hillsdale.
- Grudin, J., (2006). Is HCI homeless?: In search of inter-disciplinary status. *Interactions*, (13:1): 54-59.
- Hansen, S., Berente, N. and Lyytinen, K., (2008). Emerging principles for requirements processes in organizational contexts. In: *Networking and Information Systems*, K. Lyytinen, P. Loucopoulos, and B. Robinson, editors, LNBIP 13, Springer, pp. 9–35.
- Iivari, J., (2007). A Paradigmatic Analysis of information systems as a design science. *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, (19:2): 39-64.
- Iivari, J., Isomäki, H., and Pekkola, S., (2010). The user – the great unknown of systems development: reasons, forms, challenges, experiences and intellectual contributions of user involvement. *Information Systems Journal*, (20:2): 109-117.
- Jones, P. H., (2008). Socialization of Practice in a Process World: Toward Participatory Organizations. In: *Proceedings of the 10th anniversary conference on Participatory Design: Experiences and Challenges*, J. Simonsen, T. Robinson, and D. Hakken, editors, Bloomington, Indiana, ACM Press.
- Karasti, H. and Baker, K. S., (2008). Community Design: Growing One's Own Information Infrastructure. In: *Proceedings of the 10th anniversary conference on Participatory Design: Experiences and Challenges*, J. Simonsen, T. Robinson, and D. Hakken, editors, Bloomington, Indiana, ACM Press. Pp. 217-220.
- Mathiassen, L., and Nielsen, P. A., (2008). Engaged scholarship in IS research—the Scandinavian case. *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, (20:2): 3-20.

- Nuojua, J., Juustila, A., Räisänen, T., Kuutti, K., and Soudunsaari, L., (2008). Exploring Web-based Participation Methods for Urban Planning. In: *Proceedings of the 10th anniversary conference on Participatory Design: Experiences and Challenges*, J. Simonsen, T. Robinson, and D. Hakken, editors, Bloomington, Indiana, ACM Press.
- Oostveen, A.-M. and van den Besselaar, P., (2004). From small scale to large scale user participation: a case study of participatory design in e-government systems. In: *Proceedings of the Participatory Design Conference*, Toronto, Canada. Pp. 173–182.
- Ramiller, N. C., Swanson, E. B. and Wang, P., (2008). Research directions in information systems: toward an institutional ecology. *Journal of the Association for Information Systems*, (9:1): 1-22.
- Simonsen, J., (2009). A concern for engaged scholarship: The challenges for action research projects. *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, (21:2): 111-128.
- Simonsen, J. and Hertzum, M., (2008). Participative Design and the Challenges of Large-Scale Systems: Extending the Iterative PD Approach. In: *Proceedings of the 10th anniversary conference on Participatory Design: Experiences and Challenges*, J. Simonsen, T. Robinson, and D. Hakken, editors, Bloomington, Indiana, ACM Press. Pp. 1-10.
- SJIS, (2009). Special issue on distributed participatory design. *Scandinavian Journal of Information Systems*, (21:1).