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# Broadening Discussion About Participatory Design

## A response to Kyng

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In his piece titled *Bridging the gap between politics and techniques: On the next practices of participatory design* Kyng (2010) invites us to develop PD into an important part of the next practices of ICT design. Kyng's examination of PD is both welcome and long overdue. Indeed, many of the issues Kyng raises have been left relatively unexplored in recent discussions about participatory design (e.g., issues of intellectual property, and the relationship between funding agencies, outputs produced by practitioners, and the outcomes achieved by PD projects).

By working to expand our sense of the arena in which PD can, and arguably should take place, (e.g., by addressing issues such as funding and its influence on intellectual property rights), Kyng makes a case for an expansion of PD practices to reflect new realities of ICT design, which are occurring in an environment which differs in important ways from the earlier days of participatory design.

Kyng offers us a framework for understanding, discussing and doing PD research, with the aim of increasing the influence of PD research on ICT design. He introduces and outlines elements of the framework which he then uses to examine past and present PD projects, and make recommendations about future PD projects. While some of the elements of his framework have been the focus of scholars over the years (e.g., the ideals upon which PD are based, or techniques used to support PD activities), other elements of Kyng's framework (such as issues related to the roles companies play in PD processes, intellectual property rights, issues related to how funding influences PD activities, and project outcomes) have received comparatively little attention in PD scholarship and are welcome and overdue additions. Taken together, the elements form a framework which can help us explore similarities and differences in PD projects, the ideals upon which they are built, and the outcomes PD practitioners and projects achieve.

However, while using the framework as a means of planning PD projects, or to retrospectively examine completed projects may help us to systematically understand and compare PD

projects, there is no guarantee that using Kyng's framework will lead to the sort of critical self-reflection that PD, as a community, has evaded for years. Here I argue that our community has been extremely self protective over the years, and that our focus on issues such as the ideals underlying PD has come at the expense of examining underlying issues which deter us from realizing those ideals. I suggest that useful debates about some of the issues that PD struggles with as a community have occurred in cognate areas such as action research, and that we would be wise to expand the terms of debate which are permissible under the rubric of PD if we want to expand our scope of influence. Kyng's framework can help focus our attention on some elements of PD that warrant more attention than they have received, but using Kyng's framework in and of itself will not necessarily focus our attention as a community on the processes of PD in a manner that will help us expand our scope of influence. The framework is a reasonable starting point, but it doesn't go far enough.

While there are many points worthy of comment in Kyng's piece, in the interest of brevity here I will focus on issues related to the outcomes of PD projects (the impact that the efforts of participatory design practitioners and participants have on either technology design or work practices and workplace democracy), and the underlying and often competing interests that come to bear on PD design projects which have received surprising little attention in discussions about PD. Here I turn to literature concerned with action research to make the point that within the PD community we have gotten so focussed on processes of participation (often expressed as a focus on methods of engagement, techniques for prototyping, etc.), that we have forgotten about project outcomes. I also suggest that if we focussed more on the outcomes of our contributions as PD practitioners, our efforts would likely fall short, and would in turn necessitate a focus on the messy bits of PD processes, which, I suggest, as a community, we have been loathe to consider. Kyng's call to focus on issues such as project funding and intellectual property issues might provide a means through which we can begin to discuss some of the difficult issues we have been hesitant to address, however, this will only be the case if we allow it to happen.. In addressing these issues, I suggest that PD has much to gain by exploring related areas of inquiry such as action research, which offer resources that can help us further explore some of the issues Kyng raises which to date have fallen outside of debates about PD. I also suggest that we consider Kyng's piece only a starting point, and that we encourage broad and open debate about the elements of his framework in the spirit of increasing our scope of intellectual boundaries as a community.

## **1 The lure of ideals and ideals as an end in themselves**

The first element Kyng identifies in his framework is ideals. Examples of ideals from early PD projects are workplace democracy, and providing support for user interests. Kyng suggests that more recently, emphasis on PD projects has shifted to user involvement throughout projects and an end goal of developing better systems for all. He suggests that PD was initially attractive to many because "it entailed notions of ethics, values [and] democracy" (p. 6), and there was

evidence of emphasis on workplace democracy and trade union partnerships through the 1980s and early 1990s. Kyng suggests however that design ideals of user involvement throughout the project and involvement with prototyping became the emphasis of PD projects after the early 1990s.

Ideals have been an important aspect of PD, and, as such, it is important to remain focussed on our ideals. However, our fervent focus on the ideals upon which PD is based may effectively steer our attention away from what are arguably more difficult questions. For example, what outcomes are we seeking to achieve (e.g., capacity building among workers or users to engage in critical debate about technology? Or technology designs that show evidence of the ideals which we, as a community, espouse? Can we have good participatory processes that do not show evidence of more democratic ideals in the resulting artefacts? And if so, is that enough? Or, if we remain clear in our commitment to our ideals and have good processes that do not yield the results we desire, what other factors (for example, organizational dynamics? The pace of change? Conflicting agendas of workers/ users vs. participatory design practitioners vs. the companies with whom we collaborate in the name of participation?) may be impeding our success in achieving the outcomes we desire?

Kyng cites the loss of influence of trade unions and the expanding role of other institutions such as NGOs in representing more diverse democratic interests and the changing role of ICTs as reasons for the change in emphasis on the underlying ideals of PD. While these explanations no doubt hold weight, it is also perhaps useful to look towards action research literature to gain insights about the change in emphasis over time in PD from workplace democracy to user involvement throughout design processes. Although PD and action research have common roots (Balka, 2005), there has been surprisingly little consideration of scholarship about action research in PD communities (for exceptions, see Beck 2002; Balka 2005; Bossen 2006 and Foth & Axup 2006), although concepts from the world of action research can aid us in understanding our practice as PD practitioners, and can help us to address some of the challenges Kyng has identified.

## 2 The missing link: insights from action research and their relevance to participatory design

Greenwood and Levin (1998) suggest that action research is a diverse (and often divergent) set of practices aimed at using social research to help bring about democratic social change. Crediting the emergence of action research (AR) to the industrial democracy movement, which Greenwood and Levin (1998) suggest was “the first systematic and reasonably large-scale AR effort in Western industrialized countries” (p. 15), it can be argued that participatory design and action research have common roots (Balka, 2005).

Action research is undertaken with the aim of increasing the ability of a participating community (or organization) to more effectively control their destinies. It is supposed to support action that will lead to a more just or satisfying situation for participants. Participation exists within a larger framework that is based on general principles of a liberal democracy, which sug-

gest that participation in decision making is a civic right and duty, and that through organized political processes, multiple interests can be represented. Greenwood and Levin (1998) suggest that participation places a strong value on democracy and control over one's life, and that it seeks to "alter the initial situation of the group's organization, or community in the direction of a more self-managing liberated state" (p. 11). Greenwood and Levin equate democracy with the creation of arenas for lively debate and decision making that respect and enhance groups' diversity.

Greenwood and Levin (1998) and Richardson (1983) both credit Pateman's (1970) work, *Participation and Democratic Theory* as having established a theoretical backdrop for participation. Pateman (1970, p. 43) wrote that:

The justification for a democratic system in the participatory theory of democracy rests primarily on the human results that accrue from the participatory process. One might characterise the participatory model as one where maximum input (participation) is required and where output includes not just policies (decisions) but also the development of the social and political capacities of each individual, so there is 'feedback' from output to input.

Greenwood and Levin suggest that with this claim, rhetoric shifted from a focus on democracy to an emphasis on empowerment, and from an emphasis on participation as the key to democracy to an emphasis on participation as a necessary requisite for motivating workers to shape more effective organizations. Similarly, reflecting on the community development literature, Lennie (2001, p. 56) suggests that "empowerment is often equated with participation." Greenwood and Levin argue that empowerment has come to substitute for the much clearer and more ambitious concepts of participation and democracy—and I'd like to suggest that in the PD community, we too have gone down this road, and that the goal of participation—which in our community often finds expression in papers about methodologies used to engender participation—has become a goal in itself, at the expense of a focus on either the outcomes of our processes, or questions about why what may be 'feel good processes' do not produce better long term results. And, our emphasis on processes of participation has arguably shifted emphasis away from outcomes of participatory processes.

Writing about participation in action research projects in 1983, Richardson (p. 125) commented that "there is a need for greater information about outcomes, and what people feel about them, in order to understand what participation means in practice." The same could be argued today in relation to participatory design: we seldom discuss the outcomes our projects achieve in relation to the ideals we hold dear, and even less frequently do we seek input from our participants about their views of our processes and the outcomes that result. Asking these questions can be messy and they have not always been well received by reviewers. For example, in a project where school children were participants in a design process aimed at improving software for teaching mathematical concepts, although there was evidence of our participants' contributions in the software that was ultimately produced, the fact that the children who participated in design of the software moved on to the next grade the following year and would no longer be using the software left us with questions about who really benefitted from the PD activities we had undertaken (Balka et al. 1988).

Increasing our focus on the outcomes of participatory processes (e.g., is there any evidence of workers'/users' participation in technologies which are adopted?) can help us understand challenges associated with influencing change (e.g., if there was receptivity to design ideas, are there explanations for why they were not implemented, or why they may have been implemented differently than advocated for by participants? What can we learn about the organizations we attempt to work within by focussing on factors that shaped whether or not design ideas were implemented?). Making the outcomes of participatory processes—and specifically, whether or not we can see evidence of workers'/users' design influences in the technologies whose development they contribute to, or in work practices that work better from end users' perspectives (as opposed to management perspectives only) can help focus out attention on what Kyng has identified as a challenge for the next PD practice—designing better systems for users and organizations—precisely because it is likely to focus our attention on organizations. Focussing on the outcomes of PD activities will help us remain focussed on our scope of influence and should guard against “engaging in politically correct research with little scope of influence.” Additionally, remaining focussed outcomes—and specifically, whether or not the designs we contribute to show evidence of democratic ideals or work practices that are improved from workers'/users' points of view—will also help PD practitioners distinguish our contributions from those championing participation for other reasons (e.g., user interests in the service of management controlled agendas).

### 3 The role of funding

Kyng writes that the emphasis of PD projects has shifted from (for example) an emphasis on development of teaching materials for users in the early days of PD to the development of research papers more recently. This is not surprising in light of changes which have occurred in academia in general (which have included increased emphasis on research outputs in the form of academic papers) and with respect to research funding in particular (Monastersky 2005). Kyng writes that there has been a shift from basic university funding for research projects to external project funding acquired through competition in Scandinavia, which increasingly encourages cooperation with non-research partners. In Canada too, recent years have seen an expanded emphasis on community partnership research as well as applied research, which has been supported through national funding agencies and peer reviewed grants. In spite of the emphasis on conducting research in partnership with non-academic stakeholders, adjudication processes for funding in Canada still privilege peer reviewed journal articles above all else, although considerable rhetoric about knowledge translation (“the process of taking evidence from research and applying it in [clinical] practice” (Doherty 2005, p. 314), or “the deliberate means where information is diffused with an implementation stratagem to ensure that information is reaching a desired population and subsequently being used in current practices” (Szeben 2003, p. 134) and knowledge utilization/mobilization (finding “effective ways to disseminate, transfer, synthesize and broker research results to wider audiences” (SSHRC 2010)) exists.

Although the emphasis on engaging non-academic partners in research projects funded with academic funding (as has been the case in Canada) does create space for some opportunities for participatory design (see, for example, projects undertaken as part of ACTION for Health), in

a Canadian context, it also presents challenges, as the often differing needs of academic production (of papers) and the needs of community partners (e.g., for assistance with technology implementation, or written materials that are more practical than academic) are often at odds and present challenges for PD practitioners (see for example Bolus' 2010 discussion of the competing demands she faced in fieldwork undertaken as part of her doctoral research). Although I agree with Kyng that new funding arrangements may create some opportunities for PD, at least in a Canadian context, we have also become aware of some challenges which can accompany collaboration of researchers with 'community' partners.

For example, in one situation, we applied to a federal research agency for funding, and upon hearing we were successful in the competition, we were informed that half of our funds would come from a second agency whose mission is to support the development and implementation of health information technologies. The research agency was accustomed to providing grants, and we received our money from them shortly after it was awarded. We then spent the next year trying to obtain funds from our second funder, who, not being a research agency, was only accustomed to providing contracts, and not grants. They issued contracts to the university which the university refused to sign, because the contracts infringed on academic freedom and the funders' intellectual property (IP) policy was at odds with the university's IP policy. The university lawyers spent so much time negotiating with the second funder, they decided to recover some of the costs from the research funds, which made the project untenable. As principle investigator, I tried to give back the funding (which so far had cost me time and yielded little funds or research). My efforts to give back the funds I had already received caught the attention of the first funding agency, who eventually intervened on behalf of our research team, and we received the second portion of our funds eighteen months late. This delay led to significant changes in our project.

In another instance, we obtained funds to carry out a participatory design project in a medical clinic. Because funding regulations did not allow us to flow funds to our community partner, our researcher/PD practitioner was paid by the university and not the clinic. Had the researcher/PD practitioner been paid by the clinic, she would have been considered a clinic employee, and clinic policies governing privacy and confidentiality of health information would have applied to her. However, since she was not technically a clinic employee but rather a university employee, it was determined that she should not have any access to the contents of medical records, which had an impact on the scope of work she was able to perform in support of the clinic. One could argue that in both instances, situations could have been easily resolved with research agreements, and this is of course true. However, the point is that as the institutional relationships surrounding our projects change (for example, to encourage partnerships with companies), so too must the policy and legal frameworks which govern those projects, which both reflect and have implications for IP rights. Hence I'd like to suggest that while new funding arrangements may provide opportunities for greater participation, that these opportunities may also be accompanied by new challenges, and may create a need for new kinds of governance instruments to support cooperation and distribute any economic benefits accruing from PD equitably. Similarly, PD activities may expose companies to new kinds of risks (e.g., ambiguity of how to handle health information privacy in relation to a PD practitioner), which may require new forms of agreements.

## 4 Next steps

Kyng's invitation and challenge to develop PD into the next practices of ICT design are welcome and long overdue. His reminder that we need to demonstrate that PD can deliver more than politics for the users and techniques for IT-professionals pursuing a management agenda, and that research papers are not enough offer strong starting points for a reformulation of PD aimed at increasing our scope of influence. His identification of varied issues, and in particular, those related to company roles and IP, and funding, and his reminder that the outcomes of PD projects matter, will, no doubt, contribute to a healthy future for PD. At the same time, if we truly do engage in the issues which lie at the heart of Kyng's framework, new questions (e.g., are there particular kinds of roles vis-à-vis institutions that might particularly support PD activities? What new kinds of governance structures and policies may be required to support new funding arrangements and IP issues? What do we need to know about the organizations as institutions in order to effectively work with both funding agencies and research institutions in an effort to carry out PD?), as well as questions and issues which some would argue there has been a resistance to engaging with in the past, are likely to emerge.

Kyng's piece is a starting point. It outlines and begins to sketch out terrain worthy of in depth exploration. Kyng puts issues on the agenda, however, to move debates about PD forward there may be some value in looking back at what we can learn from debates which have taken place within action research. The elements Kyng has identified in his conceptual framework to bridge the gap between politics and techniques can serve as a useful starting point for moving forward, but will fail to have significant impact unless we, as a community, are prepared to engage in open and wide ranging debate which will allow us to question, enrich and challenge what Kyng has offered us. As a community, we are well past our infancy and perhaps now are ready to embrace broader terms of debate. Kyng has given us an excellent place to begin.

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