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# On the Multifaceted Future of Participatory Design: A response to the responses

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## A response to the responses

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# 1   Introduction and background

In this paper I have the pleasure of responding to three insightful commentaries to my paper, *Bridging the gap between politics and techniques: On the next practices of participatory design* (Kyng 2010). The commentaries are by Ellen Balka (2010), Helena Karasti (2010) and Dan Shapiro (2010). They deserve more in depth consideration than time and space allow. Hopefully the authors and I, as well as many more, will have the opportunity to continue the debate in the not too distant future.

In my 'gap paper' (Kyng 2010) I argue for a re-focusing of PD research in order to increase the impact of PD research on the next practices of ICT design. I present a framework for this quest and invite and challenge others to participate. As I read the commentaries all three authors welcome the debate and agree with most of the 'big picture' presented in the paper. At the same time, they point to new issues and give critical comments to the framework and my use of it. Below I discuss what I find to be the most important issues raised, including a few where we are disagreeing and a few where I believe that we are misunderstanding each other. However, before doing so I spell out a few statements that form important parts of the background to what I'm trying to do. The first statement reads:

> We, the PD research community, do not have to agree—especially not on politics and priorities.

Part of my motivation for writing the gap paper was dissatisfaction with what I read as misplaced calls for "explicit political agreement" among PD researchers. I don't think that we ever had such

an agreement, we don't need one, and I even think that searching for a political agreement might slow down 'doing PD' in service of many different agendas. I'll illustrate this briefly:

Early Scandinavian PD was often equated with a strong political vision. While the three keywords: PD, trade unions and workplace democracy are a reasonable characterization of a few early projects (Nygaard and Bergo 1975; Carlson et al. 1978; Kyng and Mathiassen 1982; Ehn and Kyng 1987), they do not characterize very many PD projects (cf. my discussion in Kyng 2010). Pelle Ehn and I tried to emphasize this point by naming the approach of the Utopia project as 'the collective resource approach' and thus facilitate talking about this approach as different from other PD approaches.

But the idea of a shared political vision is attractive and proposals occur every now and then. One of the more recent is the 'public procurement' proposed by Dan Shapiro (2005). I agree on many of the issues raised by Shapiro. But I fail to see why he calls for "working consensus within the community" (Shapiro 2005, p. 36).

In my gap paper I suggested a set of issues for future PD research—and I hope that many researcher and practitioners want to work with them. However, many other important issues exist, and especially when we discuss priorities, e.g., what each of us will do the next years, I do not find that we should try to convince "the PD research community" to agree on any list. Some might want to focus on critical self reflection, some on PD in developing countries and others again on PD with NGOs or the new possibilities for PD created by the global economic crisis.

Maybe the notion "we, the PD research community" is part of the problem. True, the words make sense in some contexts, and I use them myself. But often, especially when considering ideals, politics, reasons and choice I find that an "I" makes more sense. Thus I encourage all of us to carefully consider who may be covered when somebody writes "we".

The second statement on the background to my gap paper reads:

> PD research projects are important—but not a representative subset of projects developing ICT support by the use of PD.

When reading PD research papers I have, especially during the last ten years or so, been frustrated by what I see as a lack of attention to the differences between PD research projects and other projects where the aims are to develop ICT support and where PD is used—although there are exceptions, see e.g., (Kensing 2003). In my view, what is really important is what is going on with development and use of ICT. Our actions as PD researchers will only be a small part of this and will depend heavily on the partners we have in our work.

Thus we, or rather some of us, should supplement our research projects with an effort directed towards influencing all the many current and future development projects that want to or are trying to include PD in their work. This was a major motivation for writing my gap paper, and elaborated in that paper.

## 2    Critical self reflection, reflective research, and links from PD to other research areas

The framework was developed to help focusing and reflecting on issues that I find need more attention from those wanting to increase the impact of PD research on the next practices of ICT design. From the commentaries, I get the impression that the authors mostly agree on this. In addition they find that the framework is useful as a tool to begin critical self reflection, which is a valuable activity in its own right.

In their commentaries Balka and Karasti call for "critical self reflection" and "reflective research" respectively. I agree very much. Myths are commonplace in PD, and I'm sure that we can all learn from critical self reflection and reflective research. Personally I find that one such myth concerns early agreement on workplace or industrial democracy. At the same time I admit that the lack of discussions on what new ideals are or could be in current PD projects, came as a bit of a surprise to me when I began my own critical self reflection. In reading Balka's commentary I also find her focus on outcome (Balka 2010, p. 79), very interesting—both as part of our critical self reflection and of doing PD that is more useful for the users.

In addition Balka specifically argues for the importance of considering the links between PD and action research, and once more I agree. I will, however, add that the issues that Balka points to are related to high level concerns about democratic social change, and while such issue are important to many of us, I do not believe that they should be on a "requirements list" for all PD.

This being said, action research was an important part of the context shaping the early Scandinavian PD projects, i.e., what we called the 'collective resource approach' projects. When we began to work with ICT support for health care and care early in the 2000s, see e.g., (Clemensen et al. 2007), it turned out that action research, including something called participatory action research, played a prominent role in nursing research (Holter and Schwartz-Barcott 1993; Lindsey et al. 1999; Löfman et al. 2004). This lead some of us to look at action research also outside health care and care, reading, e.g., Greenwood and Levin (Greenwood and Levin 2000), two of the authors that Balka cites, as well as (Kemmis and McTaggart 2000; O'Brien 2001).

Other areas where interesting work is being done are innovation research, cf., references in (Kyng 2010, p. 51), and architecture, especially city planning. The book (Blundell-Jones et al. 2005), e.g., (Richardson and Connelly 2005), contains some thought provoking reflections on problematic aspects of democratic ideals in relation to city planning processes.

## 3    Why PD – realizing ideals, political agendas, and/or a post-political 'best practice'?

For many of us a primary reason for working with PD was, and is still, the democratic ideals associated with it. However, in my view democratic ideals, maybe except for the palest reflections, should not be forced on participants, not even in PD projects.

In some projects democracy is an ideal high on the agenda of all partners. On the other hand, in many mundane projects such political ideals are often not shared by all and thus not included when the participants in a project are trying to establish common ground for their activities. In such situations agreement often seems to develop around what Greenbaum (1993) calls the pragmatic perspective, or what Shapiro calls the strong view (Shapiro 2010, p. 71)—if such agreement is spelled out at all.

Shapiro states that he is not as optimistic as I in relation to the future of PD, and cites the problems in arguing for the strong view of the benefits of PD (Shapiro 2010, p. 71). I'm still not that worried. When ideals and politics are not the main arguments in favour of PD I find that we have a very good case, see e.g., Greenbaum and Kyng (1991) and Greenbaum (1993). I even find data in support of an almost strong view of the benefits of PD in some of the research on innovation, e.g., in the book *Democratizing Innovation* (Hippel 2005).

It follows that I personally agree with Balka when she puts ideals high on the agenda. However, I do not agree that we cannot have "good participatory processes that do not show more democratic ideals in the resulting artifacts"[1] (Balka 2010, p. 80). To illustrate: I find that the iHospital project is an example of "good participatory processes". The resulting ICT system contributes to improved work environment (Kyng 2010, p. 55). However, it is not obvious where democracy fits in when this system is bought by a new hospital that was not involved in the original PD project. Actually, democracy may have been involved in the processes that led the new hospital to make the decision to buy the iHospital system. Yet that is outside the control of the original iHospital PD project. On the other hand, what the original iHospital project could have done was to produce material for the different groups affected by the iHospital system, discussing pros and cons, options and possibilities. I hope that the framework presented in the gap paper may help future projects focus and deliver on such possibilities.

Ideals in the form of political agendas are also discussed by Karasti, who has a section on the many political agendas faced by contemporary PD (Karasti 2010). Once again I agree, the agendas presented are interesting and relevant for PD, but mainly for those who choose to work with them. Thus when Karasti writes "Therefore, we—the PD research community—need to learn about the gamut of political issues and agendas involved in the increasingly complex techno-social-political-societal contexts into which we take PD", (ibid., p. 87), I will re-emphasize the nature of the "we". I do not find that each of us should be obliged to learn much about contexts into which we, as individuals, do not take PD just because others do.

# 4   On scope and gap

In her reading of the gap paper Karasti finds my framework too narrow for the different political agendas. She interprets the scope of the framework to be "big projects in commercial settings" (ibid., p. 89). I have to accept that the framework and paper can be read in this way, but that was definitely not my intention. Few of the projects I find interesting, and none of the projects I have worked with, are big projects in commercial settings. Most are not in commercial settings and those who are are not big. To illustrate, the iHospital project was a research PD project carried out by university employees and personnel at the hospital. The decision to make a com-

mercial product was made only when it turned out that the personnel at the hospital wanted to continue to use the prototype beyond the time frame of the research project. At this point in time the project was almost finished. Thus I do not find it reasonable to categorize the iHospital project as taking place in a commercial setting.

Karasti herself has two suggestions for modifying the framework that may actually help avoiding such misinterpretations. She suggests broadening the discussion of IPR to ownership and that of company roles to partner roles. I agree on both suggestions, my original choices reflected where I had the most to say, but they clearly need to be expanded (Karasti 2010, p. 85).

When turning from scope and delimitation of issues to what belongs in the gap, Karasti explicitly mentions 'users', 'settings' and 'safeguarding user interests' as non-gap issues (ibid., p. 86). Probably many readers will agree with Karasti, since several papers mentions changes regarding users and settings from early to recent PD research projects. However, I still think that the issues belong in the gap. I will try to explain: An issue do not need to be ignored in the literature to be placed in the gap[2]. The main criteria for placing an issue in the gap are that important changes have occurred and that the new conditions for doing PD haven't been debated—and definitely not turned into new 'tricks of the trade'. Thus I chose to place 'users', 'settings' and 'safeguarding user interests' in the gap because a lot of the solutions to how to do PD when PD was with workers at workplaces with trade unions safeguarding user interests do no longer work. The problems for current PD regarding these issues have not been debated at length, and no solutions for current PD have been presented. I may have overlooked the papers giving the answers—Karasti does not provide any references—and if I have, I look forward to learn more, e.g., about how to do PD with severely ill patients in relation to their own homes and how to (help them) safeguard their interest. Karasti hypothesizes that I may have excluded what she considers to be relevant PD papers because I have too narrow a view on what counts as PD (ibid., p. 86). I have no problems including the kind of PD that she mentions, e.g., PD 'in the small' and 'in the wild'—on the contrary, but again, that is no guarantee for not overlooking relevant papers.

# 5   On tricks

The last of the issues raised by the three commentators are those presented by Karasti in the section "Tricks of the Trade for practicing PD ideals" (ibid., p. 87f).

First of all, let me admit that I did not know the book that Karasti is referring to, the *Tricks of the Trade: How to Think about Your Research While You're Doing It* (Becker 1998). I have now skimmed the first few chapters, which seem as interesting as the title. Writing something of that kind for PD sounds like a good idea. On the other hand, I find that, e.g., the book *Design at Work* (Greenbaum and Kyng 1991) could be considered as a first attempt at doing something like that; maybe not much, but something.

The reason that Karasti mentions the *Tricks* is, however, that she believes that they are missing in my paper and that "the work that goes into 'safeguarding user interests' is put into background and thus is in risk of becoming invisible" (Karasti 2010, p. 87). I'm a bit surprised by this statement, since my intention was the opposite, i.e., to bring all the gap issues, including

the user interests and how to safeguard them into focus. Karasti illustrates her point of view and my alleged ambiguity by two quotes from my paper: "we have to continue to cater for the PD aspects of ICT design, e.g., how to provide space for users to handle their interests", and "we have to develop answers that are valid also for people who do not condone a political agenda" (ibid., p. 88). Let's look at the first part of the first quote: "we have to continue to cater for the PD aspects of ICT design". This is more or less what my whole paper is about, and not in the background. The second part of the first quote, "e.g., how to provide space for users to handle their interests", is one of the gap issues or elements, i.e., something I point to as important and something that we should focus on. The text on safeguarding user interests (cf. table 2, p. 63 in Kyng 2010), is intended as advice on how to think about and how to do this—not as a way of backgrounding. But maybe the main problem is really Karasti's interpretation of the second quote, i.e., "we have to develop answers that are valid also for people who do not condone a political agenda". My intention was not to be "clever" as Karasti assumes, but simply to point out that I find it important that those of us who want to increase the impact of PD research on the next practices of ICT design develop such answers, see also the weak and strong views of the benefits of PD (Shapiro 2010, p. 69f).

Karasti also finds support for her worries concerning invisibility in my description of the Dragon and iHospital projects. She quotes the following from my gap paper: "creating such Concrete Consensus [was] usually considered to be a direct result of good design work [...] where no explicit initiatives were taken but those related to design itself" (emphasis HK, Karasti 2010, p. 88). And goes on to hypothesize that "Statements like this hide the valuable expertise and knowledge about the deliberations and strategies needed in safeguarding user interests in design processes and negotiations between various stakeholders. In this case in particular, Kyng's indispensable long-term experience and historical perspective gained through involvement in many PD projects also remain unrevealed. One is left wondering what actually goes into good design work", (ibid., p. 88). Quite a lot is assumed in these few lines. I will need a few lines more to discuss it. First of all, nothing is being hidden here. In the quote I simply note that "no explicit initiatives were taken but those related to design itself". I don't find this to be "good" or "bad". I was actually a bit surprised by the lack of explicit initiatives on, e.g., safeguarding user interests, but that was the way it was and thus that was what I reported. I hope that my gap paper and the framework presented may change the situation in the future and result in more focus on what the specific elements are, e.g., in a case of concrete consensus, how the specific elements may be translated and used by other organizations, etc. Secondly, my "long-term experience and historical perspective gained through involvement in many PD projects" did not "remain unrevealed", at least not in the Dragon and iHospital projects, simply because I was only involved marginally. Finally, Karasti finds herself "left wondering what actually goes into good design work". In this she is not alone, and that was actually my point: when gap issues like safeguarding user interests are not addressed explicitly and when 'good design work' (e.g., using PD techniques in a competent, contextualized way) is assumed to be enough for all partners and their interests, then we need to do better—at least in explaining what is going on.

# 6 What will you do – What will I do?

One of the subheadings in Balka's paper reads (Balka 2010, p. 78): "The lure of ideals and ideals as an end in themselves". Under that heading she warns that democratic processes are not enough, we have to look also at the outcomes of those processes. I agree, and I find the recommendation in line with the ideas brought forward in my gap paper, i.e., more focus on outcomes compared to ideals and techniques. However, reading Balka's commentary as well as the other two, made me think of some of the problems my colleagues and I encountered during our work on the early Scandinavian PD projects, problems that one could label "The lure of ideals". During those early projects the political ideals were at the forefront of our work—and the content of our research was shaped by the needs as they developed in those projects. However, even in those days our professional roots were in the area of computers and design. The political work we did—as part of our job—was based on our competencies in that area, and the results of our work were also—albeit with considerable delay—translated into research papers published in that area. This might sound trivial, but in the often heated debates of those days (1968 wasn't that far away) it was a rather operational way to exclude quite a few proposals for new types of "political action as part of our work". We only engaged in activities, which were justifiable as related to research on computers and design. This, unfortunately, excluded some very interesting proposals for new projects, for example the idea of creating a 'desk top printing' education for typographers in the Nordic countries, based in a travelling educational lab in the form of a large bus equipped with ten to twenty work stations, a laser printer and a scanner. On the other hand, had Pelle Ehn and I, who developed the proposal, really wanted to do this, we could have applied for new funding and quit our university jobs.

A very practical way of investigating how one—e.g., the reader or I—thinks about ideals and 'good PD' is to consider what to teach, e.g., to PhD students doing research in PD compared to a curriculum for master students who want to work as system developers. Teaching the PhD students could be like preparing them for future PD research projects, while teaching future system developers is the challenge I believe that we have to face if we want to seize one of the biggest opportunities for PD research, that is to increase the impact on the next practices of ICT design. Some of my colleagues and I have recently decided to develop three courses of 5 ECTS each for system developers who want to improve their qualifications for working with developing new types of ICT support in the area of health care and care. PD will be a key part of this and the main argument will be along the lines the pragmatic perspective, cf., (Greenbaum 1993) and the so-called strong view (Shapiro 2010, p. 71). But when teaching the courses I will, in my presentation, add that for those who—like myself—want to support democratic ideals, PD is preferable to other types of system development that I know of.

At the same time I'm annoyed that I can't make a few copies of myself and dedicate one of them to work much more with critical self reflection, reflective research, and what we may learn from action research, innovation research, city planning, etc. I hope that this annoyance will grow until I at least take the time to organize one or two workshops where some of us will get a chance to discuss.

# 7 Acknowledgements

# 8 Notes

1. I'm not quite sure that Balka is saying this—and I apologize for any misinterpretations.

2. Actually (Kyng 2010, p. 52), mentions that several papers discuss the issues, which Karasti does not find belong in the gap.

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