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Taking PD to Multiple Contexts

A response to Kyng

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1 Introduction

I applaud Kyng for initiating this timely debate on the next practices in participatory design (PD). In the face of ongoing change trends in the technological, social, economic, and societal conditions, Kyng invites and challenges us—the PD research community—to take-stock of past experience in PD and reconsider future steps in order to “develop PD into an important part of the next practices of ICT design”. Kyng begins by identifying two thriving loci of PD research: ‘politics’ and ‘techniques’, and the ‘gap’ between them. He puts forward a supplementary framework for understanding, discussing, and conducting PD research that consists of a set of ‘gap’ issues, such as project funding, types of users and use settings, the role of companies and intellectual property rights, and types of PD projects. Kyng argues for more research on these rarely debated issues in order to bridge the gap.

I agree with Kyng that PD has the potential to help address the new challenges embedded in the change trends, and that in exploiting the new opportunities we need a better understanding of the contexts in which we conduct PD research.

I started preparing this response with a thought experiment, and I applied Kyng’s framework to my ongoing PD research in the context of large-scale scientific collaboration and collaborative information infrastructure development in Long-Term Ecological Research (LTER) networks (Karasti and Baker 2004, 2008; Karasti et al. 2006, 2010). The framework worked well for articulating important characteristics of the context and for bringing about differences in comparison to Kyng’s commercial ICT design context. Indeed, I only had to rename two commercial context specific ‘gap’ issues in order to make them more inclusive. Changing ‘company roles’ to ‘partner roles’ created room for the kinds of large-scale interdisciplinary collaborations and partnerships typical of LTER networks that do not involve companies. Alteration of ‘IPR’ to ‘ownership questions’ was necessary because in LTER contexts IPR is far less important than

'sharing for the common good' and open movements (though, of course, these are also contested matters). Based on the thought experiment, I see no reason to limit Kyng's framework only to commercial ICT design contexts. As the ongoing change trends influence all PD contexts, a more comprehensive understanding is needed to discuss and develop the next practices of PD.

In the following, I outline some concerns that I have regarding Kyng's article. While I agree about the 'techniques' bias in PD research, the identified gap with rarely debated issues is not entirely convincing. I also discuss politics and ideals; troubled by the way they are backgrounded and thus at risk of becoming invisible. I then suggest a move to reflective research in PD, which would provide a vantage point for experiential accounts and analyses of relationships that in turn would allow for comparisons, conceptual work, and the transferability of findings. I conclude by summarizing these topics into concrete modifications and extensions of Kyng's framework.

2 Is there a 'gap'? Or what counts as PD?

Kyng's gap of rarely debated issues in PD is based on an identification of two loci of PD research: politics and techniques. I agree with Kyng that there are a disproportionate number of papers on techniques, and an identifiable but diminishing stream of research on politics (see also Beck 2002). However, Kyng's gap seems partly artificial, a result of his declared provincial starting point; drawing mainly on his own experiences and focusing on the Aarhus/Denmark projects that he knows best. His argument that there is scarce research on gap issues does not seem to hold water. First, some of the gap issues have definitely been addressed in PD research as they are classic to the tradition of user participation, such as 'users', 'settings' and 'safeguarding user interests'. Second, there is some, albeit less, research on issues such as 'company roles', 'funding' and 'outcomes', for instance (Suchman et al. 1999, Balka 2006), to name two well-known examples. The issue of IPR has received the least attention, but it is not relevant in all PD contexts. Third, some gap issues may have been addressed in other forums than those of PD by researchers who would identify themselves with PD. I know this from my own experience of publishing PD related findings elsewhere as they did not seem to fit well with accepted PD themes. Fourth, if a careful analysis was carried out to deconstruct not only the politics category, as Kyng suggests, but also the popular techniques category in order to identify which topics and questions have actually been addressed—we might find a considerable amount of research that is relevant for Kyng's gap issues.

Thus, from this perspective, it appears that PD research addressing Kyng's gap issues does indeed exist. Maybe the gap is an indication of overly tight boundaries and of a requisite for more inclusive views of what counts as PD research. For instance, in addition to big PD projects, there is much PD research 'in the small', conducted by small groups or projects, even individual researchers, as well as considerable PD research carried out as components or sub-projects in larger, non-PD oriented ICT design projects. PD is also carried out 'in the wild' (Dittrich et al. 2002), by lay-people and non-ICT professionals (Syrjänen 2007, Karasti and Baker 2008), and in intersections of disciplines (Mörtberg et al. 2003, Millerand and Baker 2010). Interdisciplinary and non-mainstream researchers habitually engage in reflections about how their work relates to and challenges what is considered relevant in disciplinary/mainstream research, and

how their research differs from the more traditional undertakings. These reflections and articulations may offer significant ‘food for thought’ regarding Kyng’s gap issues, and more generally, may offer important issues to consider for ‘the next practices in PD’.

3 Contemporary PD faced with many political agendas

In comparison to the early days of PD in one rather homogeneous culture and geographic location, and with one hegemonic political agenda of workplace democracy, political agendas in contemporary PD have become more heterogeneous and fragmented. Where the political agenda of workplace democracy was based on the industrial class division between employers and employees, other fundamental social divisions, such as gender and ethnicity, are also relevant in the various contexts where PD is currently carried out. Feminist and gender-aware research have a long history of studying ‘knowing’ and what constitutes ‘valid information’ in ICT design, including PD. These studies have, for instance, questioned taken-for-granted assumptions about participation and expertise in ICT design, and shown how gender, knowledge, power, and agency are intricately intertwined in the actual practices and concrete organizational structures where design is carried out (Markussen 1996, Mörtberg et al. 2003). These factors present themselves in varied forms in situation specific dependencies, segregations, hierarchies, and inequalities. In fact, as gender and knowledge are persistent issues in all contexts of ICT design, all PD efforts could, if they so desired, address the politics of gendered knowledge.

Ethnicity, in turn, has recently become particularly pronounced in certain PD contexts. PD has become increasingly popular and is seen as apposite for ICT design in developing countries because of its democratic origins and contextual approach. Requirements for ICT design in developing country contexts are specific to less affluent conditions, such as affordability, socio-economic justification, sustainability, extended community participation, and capacity development of the participants (Mursu et al. 2000), which portend loaded political agendas. Yet, on the other hand, the global context of ‘international development’ may bring forward further political issues related to the more mainstream discourses of social justice and equity in ICT development, including hegemony of the West/North, globalization, and racism. Therefore, PD researchers must “reflect critically on their skills, their motivations, their practices, their relationships, and their priorities” (Dearden and Rizvi 2008, p. 89).

These two examples, which are based on fundamental and pervasive social divisions, portray a variety of political agendas and issues that are very different from those of ‘user interests’ in Kyng’s commercial context and ‘sharing for the common good’ in my large-scale science context. Together, they demonstrate the contemporary situation where PD researchers are faced with a variety of challenging political agendas. 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. We need to bear in mind that there are no innocent positions (Haraway 1988), not even for researchers. Thus, we should be more sensitive in our analyses about politics, and also more attentive and inclusive with regard to

the various kinds of political issues involved in different PD contexts. Furthermore, we need to be more open to variations in how we strategize about and deal with thorny political questions with the many partners that we have in the different PD contexts.

4 Tricks of the trade for practicing PD ideals

Writing in reaction to research on politics in PD, Kyng argues to deconstruct the current politics discussion, however, unfortunately the article does not engage in the kind of careful analysis this would presuppose. Rather there seems to be a leap from the deconstruction argument to a pragmatic call for ideals that would serve in finding “new practical ways to cater for the PD aspects in ICT design”, and to choosing user interests as a way to communicate important PD ideals into commercial PD contexts. While this may give rise to criticism about diluted politics, I would be more inclusive because a variety of strategies are undoubtedly needed in varied PD contexts (cf., Greenbaum 1993).

What concerns me about Kyng’s article, however, is how the work that goes into safeguarding user interests is edged into the background and thus is at risk of becoming invisible (Star and Strauss 1999). Two quotes from Kyng’s article illustrate the ambiguity: “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”. Thus, according to Kyng, user interests need to be safeguarded, but this work has to be done so cleverly that “people who do not condone a political agenda” (well, at least not the same one as PD designers) can be persuaded about the importance of user interests. Furthermore, Kyng gives an example of how the work of forming a Concrete Consensus, i.e. a kind of mutual agreement that satisfies all parties involved, has become invisible. He recounts that reaching a Concrete Consensus in the Utopia project required “a major initiative by the trade unions and involve[d] struggle, negotiations and education as well as design and implementation of new ICT systems and new ways of organizing work”, and contrasts this with more recent Dragon and iHospital projects where “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).

Statements like this hide the valuable expertise and knowledge about the deliberations and strategies needed to safeguard user interests in design processes and during 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* and hoping that something similar to Becker’s *Tricks of the Trade* (1998) in social sciences would also exist in PD. Becker’s book, based on experiential accounts and story telling, presents common principles that lie behind *good social science work*. Kyng’s and other senior PD researchers’ experiential accounts and reflections would make a valuable contribution to the PD field in general, and especially to younger and future PD researcher generations. Balka has made an excellent opening in this direction by reflecting on her experiences and strategies *In the Belly of the Beast* (2006).

5 Now let us turn to more reflective research!

Reflection has been largely missing from PD research, and as Kyng indicates, “we are not very good at presenting and discussing the different types of projects we do”. PD research typically addresses such issues as technologies, users, use settings, and techniques. PD researchers have been fascinated and preoccupied with the user, and for good reasons: the challenges associated with understanding the users’ life world(s) have been widely acknowledged and techniques for dealing with the user have received an extraordinary interest. To make a comparison with ethnography, where the ethnographer becomes his own tool (Barley 1990), in PD the design researcher develops his/her own technique. The focus of PD researchers has been on the ‘other’ (technology and user) at the expense of concern for the self and relationships. In comparison, in more reflexive research traditions, reflection about the self, the other and their relationships have all been central (e.g., Davies 2007). As only a few reflexive accounts exist in PD (e.g., Karasti 2001; Balka 2006; Simonsen 2009), the PD researcher remains the best kept secret, with scarce articulations of the associated roles, activities, skills, knowledge, agencies, relationships, and responsibilities (cf., Finken 2003). It is obvious, however, that being a PD design researcher is a particularly intricate job as the role integrates observation, intervention, change, and action in complex ways. Furthermore, the role is becoming increasingly complicated with the movement of PD to distributed contexts (cf., multi-sited ethnography, Marcus 1995), the blurring of user-designer roles (Karasti and Baker 2004; Syrjänen 2007; Millerand and Baker 2010), and the need for PD researchers to become mediators in multi-stakeholder settings (Balka 2006). These suggest the need for the PD researcher to carry out even more careful self-examination, and the use of a variety of reflexive genres, such as confessional, pragmatic, theoretical, textual, and deconstructive.

In addition to a researcher’s personal self-examination, interpersonal and institutional reflexivity are also required in PD (e.g., Blomberg et al. 1996; Suchman et al. 1999; Balka 2006). So far, PD researchers have done the best job in providing accounts of projects, though not enough, as Kyng points out. Kyng insightfully extends the user settings and projects focus by introducing issues, such as company roles, IPR, and funding, that reach beyond the PD project and bring about relationships in the larger organizational, cross-organizational, and societal contexts. I suggest a further ambitious step: we should engage in and reflect upon science, technology, and innovation strategies and policies at a societal level (cf., arena C described as “designing the industrial relations” (Gärtner and Wagner 1996)). To do this, we should strengthen our interactions with science and technology studies (STS), a field that has a long tradition of research with more extensive societal scopes and interests than PD, similarly to the existing affinity with ethnographic workplace studies in relation to understanding use/work settings.

Lack of reflection is a frequent problem in action research, often leading to situations where little effort is directed to adding to the shared knowledge base of the field. This also makes it difficult to ground research work on the experiences gained, let alone to make conceptual advances. PD, as an area of design and research, has become more widely accepted and is mature enough to engage in self-examination. In fact, Kyng’s investigation of the past, present, and future in the PD projects that he knows best can be read as an exercise in self-examination. The reorientation to reflection would improve not only the collection of experiential accounts and analyses

of relationships but also conceptualization, transferability of findings, and theoretical work. A thorough self-examination is needed in order to plan for the next practices of PD research in its various contexts.

6 Conclusions

I applaud Kyng's timely debate article for taking the initiative and challenging the PD research community to reflect on the next practices of PD. The framework he proposes is a good start for identifying important issues, both for taking stock of the existing work and for planning the future of PD. My main concerns with Kyng's article have been to argue for a more inclusive view of the PD field with many associated political agendas, and to create room for the variety of ways and contexts in which PD is currently practiced, in addition to the 'big projects in commercial settings' that is the starting point for Kyng's argument. Based on the thought experiment in my own PD research in a large-scale science context, I suggest the renaming of two categories in Kyng's framework in order to make them more comprehensive: 'company roles' to 'partner roles' and 'IPR' to 'ownership questions'. Furthermore, aligned with the proposal to expand beyond the traditional project focus in PD, I recommend adding 'PD designer/researcher' and 'institutional relations' as two new categories to the framework. The suggestion to turn to reflective research is accompanied by encouragement to embrace an interest in studying relationships, rather than focusing on techniques, technologies, users, and projects as 'things' or 'objects'. I therefore encourage PD researchers from all walks of PD to take Kyng's challenge seriously, to try out the framework and to suggest changes relevant to their own perspectives. Only through concerted PD research community action can we form the next practices of PD.

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