Assignment 2: Participatory Design Facilitation

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Introduction

Designing with and for users has become vital for technology design projects to better understand how the product is used. The design approach participatory design (PD) wants to create the shift of the role of the users from a design recipient to an engaged design decision-maker. Its origin lies in the workplace democracy movement in the 1970s, where workers wanted to play an active part in the design processes [13]. Based on its history, the PD approach has a political dimension of user empowerment and shows democratic ideals by increasing the agency of its users and giving them a voice they did not have before [2]. Every participant of PD activities should therefore be able to express their ideas, needs and requirements, so they can genuinely influence the outcome. However, asymmetries like differences in background knowledge or social standing can surface discrepancies in discussions and collaborative design activities [5]. Therefore, user involvement often occurs through facilitated activities. The person leading those events is referred to as the facilitator [4]. The tasks of the facilitator role are beyond the mere moderation of PD activities and can be rather versatile. The main goal of the facilitator is to ensure PD's democratic and empowering values are applied [5]. In the following, it will be discussed how this role has its stand in PD activities and how its work can influence the outcome of a PD activity.

Discussion

The definition of the PD facilitator

With the support of facilitated activities in PD processes, active involvement of all stakeholders in the design process can be increased. The activities include end-users and other stakeholders and provide room for discussions and co-creation of visions about the technology for example in the form of workshops or collaborative prototyping sessions [4]. The facilitator leads these activities and is concerned with turning the PD philosophy into practice [4].

The facilitator's responsibilities far extend the ones of a technology designer or moderator in a PD activity. Dahl & Sharma (2022) interviewed experts with an academic background in PD and facilitation experience to get a deeper understanding of the facilitator role and how the guiding principles are applied in practice [4]. They classified their outcomes into six facets, describing different aspects of the facilitator role. A facilitator can act as a *trust builder*, making participants comfortable to share their thoughts by reassuring them that their expertise matters and establishing a close connection with them. Another facilitator facet is being an *enabler*, who supports participants to voice their ideas, needs and perspectives. This can be made possible through the use of common language, giving participants enough time and support to understand the design challenge and discourse management. A facilitator can also uncover conflicts of interests by acting as an *inquirer*. He or she can challenge ideas and perspectives to understand the underlying motivation behind the participant's viewpoints. As a *direction setter*, the facilitator can better align the PD activity to the agenda of the project by selectively choosing attendees, form discussions and through the use of materials. The facilitator as a *value provider* has the responsibility to strive toward actual change by turning ideas evolving from PD activities into working solutions. He or she strives for creating an experience that is

meaningful for both parts, end-users and designers. As a *users' advocate* the facilitator is playing a central role in representing the user's opinion when communicating with project partners, who are sometimes reluctant towards taking results of PD activities into consideration. Moreover, they invite members of the project, who weren't involved in the prior design process, in the last PD activity to give them first-hand experience. [4]

The role of a facilitator has many facets and is responsible for a variety of aspects supporting the PD activity. It is important for the facilitator to equalize possible power relations within the group, so as not to bias the design result in favor of the party with the strongest authority and accordingly disfavouring the weakest party [5]. It can be very hard to fulfill all facets when becoming a facilitator. This expertise is learned through experience.

The neutral implication of a PD facilitator in PD activities

Given the influence a facilitator has on a PD activity, it is vital to talk about the unintended effects he or she can have on the outcome. Therefore, it is argued that the facilitator has to be neutral. The word neutral implies that the facilitator aims to be unbiased in his or her work and they should not see themselves as members of the participants' group [12].

According to Schwarz (2005) a facilitator needs to be a substantially neutral third party to minimize the likelihood of becoming involved in content or decision-making [15, p. 27]. This can happen due to the facilitator's facet *trust builder*, when he or she is establishing close connections to the participants [4]. The facilitator creates a comfortable environment so end-users are more likely to speak open about their opinions and needs. By building close connections it can become difficult to follow an objective standpoint on the participant's voices and it becomes possible to create preferences towards specific end-users' opinions. That is why a facilitator needs to hold his or her neutral position, to not falsify the outcome with his or her interpretation. Moreover, the facilitator could influence the opinions of participants with his or her point of view on the topic. Buur & Larsen (2010) investigated participatory design conversations and recognized the dilemma of the neutral facilitator [3]. The facilitator in their study stated:

> "Maybe I was trying to put words in your [the designer's] mouth, but that was simply because I needed somebody who opposed the 'right technology', 'fast to market' and so on [positions]. I wanted somebody who represented what I represent."

The facilitator is reflecting on the incorrect behavior of how he or she influenced the participant's opinion during the PD activity by convincing a participant to state his or her opinion. As a *direction setter* the facilitator is forming discussions to align to the agenda of the PD activity [4]. It could be possible that the facilitator leads discussions in a direction he or she wants and not only based on the project's focus. In addition to that, the facilitator can make his or her own interpretation of methods applied in the PD activity. Light and Akama (2012) find that designing processes and reporting the results as a facilitator are an enactment of the designer's world-view and value systems [11]. Facilitators often do not simply use or apply methods, they perform them with their subjective nuances. Consequently, facilitators need to reflect on how they take part in subjectively influencing the PD activity and thus the design decisions.

Ensuring the facilitator's neutral position during PD activities can mitigate the risk to influence the design decisions with his or her subjective interpretation and opinions. But, this also

suppresses the facilitator's emotional and empathic trades, which help participants to feel more safe and comfortable when sharing ideas during the design activity. For being able to stay neutral, the facilitator should not engage in closer relationships with participants, since it can affect the facilitator's unbiased opinion unwillingly. But by keeping one's distance, the participants won't be able to build a sense of comfort and safety during the PD activity, so they might withhold information. Expert facilitation is a seamless conversation where the users quickly understand the subject being discussed, its relevance to their lives and easily join in the discussion of the design issues [10]. This can be done by adjusting to the participants' group structure and getting to know them on a more personal level. Furthermore, it can be hard for users to express themselves in a way that the underlying information is shared correctly. The facilitator as *enabler* can support them by creating a common language and sensitizing them about the topic beforehand [4]. This takes time and requires an understanding of the participants' limitations and problems, which can again be gained through building strong relationships with them.

The Relevance of Schön's Reflective Practice Theories

According to Borup and Stimson (2019) "facilitators are made, not born" [1]. They refer to the fact that a facilitator has no innate expertise but can become professional through practice, experience and self-reflection. Self-reflection can be a learning opportunity for facilitators to improve as facilitation is a skill and therefore needs to be trained [5]. Self-reflection is to question explicit choices and decisions taken and to analyze how one dealt with challenges [8]. A significant challenge for the facilitator is dealing with asymmetries between stakeholder groups [5]. Asymmetry refers to inequalities between participants which affect the communicative behavior of the individual participant or his or her opportunities for taking influence. Sources of asymmetry for example are knowledge differences, social status and eloquence [6]. Democracy, empowerment, and equality are not inherent characteristics of PD, but are dependent on the skills of the facilitator and his or her awareness of the influence associated with the role [5]. Therefore it is of importance that the facilitator is aware of his or her potential negative impact in the PD activity as he or she may influence the impact of these asymmetries since he or she can direct discussions and give weight to the different views. But the facilitator plays a key factor in evening out these asymmetries [5]. The factors implicating the extent to which the disadvantaged party has a say are often subtle, therefore it requires an attentive examination of one's facilitation practice to learn out of those subtleties [5].

To improve the skills as a facilitator, he or she can make use of Schön's (1984) concepts *reflection-on-action* and *reflection-in-action* [16]. *Reflection-on-action* defines the rethinking and reflection process the facilitator does after the PD activity. It refers to the consideration on how the practice can be developed, changed, or improved for the upcoming PD sessions [5]. Whereas *reflection-in-action* is about making effective on-the-spot decisions in response to immediate events. It refers to the capacity to momentarily use one's implicit knowledge and is therefore characteristic for trained professionals as it requires experience and expertise. One example for a trained facilitator using tacit knowledge is regarding the reaction of the facilitator to an evolving discussion between participants concerning a design suggestion: The trained facilitator immediately sees the incident as an opportunity to gain deeper insight into the participant's perspective, whereas the untrained facilitator would rather ignore the incident [5].

With the *reflective practice cycle* Rolfe et al. (2001) offer guidance on how reflective processes can be carried out [14]. The cycle is based on three guiding questions that can be interpreted as steps: (1) What? (2) So what? and (3) Now what? The first step examines the actions taken or

not taken by the facilitator either during the planning of the activity or during a specific critical moment. By carefully reviewing the transcripts or video recordings of the activities, the goal is to identify effects of the facilitation that were missed during the critical moments. The second step involves identifying and discussing potential and plausible consequences of the actions as facilitators. The aim is to investigate whether there is an unintended influence on the outcome of the activity. The final step is about learning important lessons from the mistakes made. The goal is to improve the planning and execution of future PD activities. [5]

The relevance of Schön's reflective practice theories are demonstrated by the fact that the inattentiveness of the design facilitator regarding his or her own performance and a lack of self-reflection is a problem for PD since this neglect potentially has implications on the PD activity and project but also beyond it [5]. On the one hand, carelessness and failure to recognize one's influence as a facilitator can potentially threaten the accountability for the results achieved [7]. But on the other hand it also has broader consequences as it also threatens the integrity of the PD as a democratic and empowering design approach [5]. Therefore in the long-term it risks forgetting the values and principles of participatory design.

Summary

PD activities are led by facilitators, who want to turn PD's empowering values into practice. Different facets of facilitators can be defined, all leading towards the goal of enabling active user involvement and eliminating asymmetries between user groups because of different social, organizational or knowledge backgrounds. Given the influence of facilitators in PD activities, their neutral position, meaning their unbiased work, can be questioned. While it is vital for them to minimize the likelihood of influencing the decision-making, it sometimes cannot be prevented because of their goal to build strong relationships between participants. Creating participants a comfortable and safe environment for information sharing can stand in opposition to keeping an objective stance when intense discussions are arising. This is why facilitators need to reflect on the relationship between their practice and the outcome of PD activities to improve their facilitation skills.

Conclusion

Staying neutral as facilitators can be complicated and may not even be possible at all, even if a neutral position would be preferable to decrease the chance of possible subjective interference during the design process by this role. Emotional, sincere facilitators can work with participants more closely, creating strong relationships between them. It is vital for the facilitators to position themselves amongst the participants to fully understand their ideas and needs. However, it is also important for them to make sure the participants are aware of the aspects of the facilitators' role, which are mainly related to the process, rather than the content resulting from the PD activity. Through reflecting on their actions, the facilitators are able to improve possible interference and can find a good balance between strong relationships and unbiased PD support.

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