Examining situated design practices: Nurses’ transformations towards genuine participation

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We scrutinise the concrete practices of participants’ engagement in participatory design through an empirical case in which nurses from different hospital wards began as reluctant users, but gradually engaged in processes approaching genuine participation. We expand a newly proposed, psychologically inspired perspective into a conceptual frame to investigate transformations towards genuine participation. This analytical lens elucidates how participants engage in becoming authentic, credible, attentive and present in participatory endeavours, and how this affects reflection and learning. The case includes the designer’s process of becoming a genuine participant during the project. By offering a new take on the concept of genuine participation using a dimension characterised by a genuine, focused presence, we offer our lessons learnt from applying the framework.

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The concepts, meanings and practices associated with participation vary enormously. In the field of participatory design (PD), the idea of ‘genuine participation’ continues to attract attention from researchers (e.g. Hägerfors, 1994; Luck, 2007; Robertson & Simonsen, 2013). Scholars understand that the direct involvement of users in the design of the artefact they will use is desirable (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013), whilst they acknowledge that in everyday situations there are degrees of success in the quality of this participation (Iivari & Kinnula, 2016). In this paper, we work with a recently introduced novel perspective on genuine participation that draws from psychology and therapy (Simonsen & Storm Jensen, 2016). We elaborate this perspective into a conceptual framing of genuine participation to examine concrete, situated instances of transformations in nurses’ participation that unfolded in our case study of a PD project as part of an information technology (IT) design process.

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Early research on participation recognised that there are different degrees of participation, and a variety of typologies has been created for differentiating degrees and kinds of participation (Cornwall, 2008). Arnstein’s typology, a ‘ladder’ of participation (Arnstein, 1969), is perhaps the most well-known and is widely used in many fields, including design, development, education, learning, planning, mental health, and work with youth/children. The ladder identifies significant gradations of shifts in control from the authorities to the participants. In other words, Arnstein’s typology ranges from the bottom rungs of ‘bad’ or absent participation to ‘better’ ones higher up. Therefore, the more ‘genuine’ forms of participation can be found at the highest levels of such hierarchical typologies. For example, Luck (2007, p. 219) notes that ‘informing, consultation and placation’, i.e. the middle rungs of Arnstein’s ladder, ‘are pseudo-participation approaches and not genuine participation.’ The kinds of participation that are referred to as ‘genuine’ include citizen control, part-taking in mutual learning processes, involvement in decision making, and influence on strategy or policy levels.

Hierarchical typologies make participation seem easily categorised, and the use of the typologies tends to be normative. In actual practices of participation, however, the divisions between the categories blur and participation emerges as less distinct. In fact, as Cornwall notes: ‘In practice, all of the forms and meanings of participation identified in the kind of typologies referred to [above] may be found in a single project or process’ (Cornwall, 2008, pp. 273–274).

In the participatory IT design tradition to which the authors subscribe, user participation has been an essential part of the situated design practices in the past (Briefs, Ciborra, & Schneider, 1983; Greenbaum, 1991) and the present (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013; Smith, Bossen, & Kanstrup, 2017). In this PD tradition, user participation has been argued by using political, emancipatory and pragmatic rationales (Robertson & Simonsen, 2013). The political and emancipatory rationales of direct user participation are historically connected to democracy, equal power relations and work-life quality (Kensing & Greenbaum, 2013) to the extent that ‘giving a voice to users’ is considered a ‘core ethical issue’ (Robertson & Wagner, 2013) and a ‘strong normative imperative’ often operationalised through addressing user participation in decision making (Bratteteig & Wagner, 2014). The pragmatic rationale, in turn, emphasises joint development of relevant and necessary knowledge in order to design useful and effective outcomes, which is called ‘mutual learning’ (Beguin, 2003; Bødker, Kensing, & Simonsen, 2004).

In this paper, we offer an original take on genuine participation that is substantially different from the existing stances on genuine participation outlined above. This notion of genuine participation that draws on work in psychology and therapy by Storm Jensen (1998, 2002) was initially briefly mentioned by
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