

# On the Degree of Participant Commitment in Non-Work Settings

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## ABSTRACT

The traditional view on participation in participatory design of workplace technologies assumes a high degree of commitment by participants. In non-work settings, however, such a degree of commitment cannot necessarily be assumed. Similarly, the social organization differs from work to non-work. In work settings the role of peers is well defined, whereas in non-work settings participating peers are more elusive—like the familiar stranger at the parents' evening at school. Furthermore, work practices are institutionalized and it is possible to enforce people to become aware of the participation activities of others. This is not the case in non-work settings with lower degrees of commitment and weaker ties to the 'organization.' Here, the means of awareness and engagement needs to be interwoven with people's day-to-day idiosyncratic activities. We exemplify this tension with a recent case on citizen participation in a Danish national park and, furthermore, discuss the impact of commitment on how we design approaches to support participation.

## Author Keywords

Participation, non-work settings, commitment, elusive peers, idiosyncratic behavior, everyday life.

## INTRODUCTION

Participatory design has traditionally taken its outset in work settings (Greenbaum and Kyng, 1991). We hypothesize that a higher degree of *participation* can be assumed in work settings due to a stronger commitment to work related activities by participants. This may explain why now, where computing increasingly moves beyond work and into our everyday lives, participation becomes a concept that requires more attention.

In our leisure lives there is a strong competition for our attention. Even causes or interests we value may be out-matched by mundane day-to-day activities. On the other hand, we are assumed to be committed in our work related activities, and our attention towards what matters is continuously kept either through obligations towards ourselves, our colleagues, or simply by being enforced by the workplace. In leisure, maintaining commitment to e.g. political causes or philanthropy is a challenge, both from the perspective of the participant and the organization behind the cause (see e.g. Bohøj et al., 2011; Korn and Bødker, 2012).

In the following, we use an exemplary case study to point to several factors regarding participation in non-work

settings that challenges our approaches to supporting such participation efforts.

## CIVIC PARTICIPATION IN A NATIONAL PARK

Take the example of a citizen participation process in Mols Bjerger, a Danish national park, about the park's forming and further development (Korn and Bødker, 2012). The case looks at civic participation in the processes of change in the physical and social environment of the park on the individual, community, and society level. We identify attributes of this particular non-work setting that we believe inform new approaches to participation beyond work.

One of the main intentions of the executing body of the participation process was to create awareness for the national park and spark conversations among the broader public in the area. Even though it was in the making for many years and debated in the local press, residents and regular visitors of the park did not always know about its existence or its significance for them personally. It occurred frequently at later interventions that they had heard about the national park for the first time. Others did not know where the national park was eventually located, where it started and where it ended. Many indicated, presented with a map, where their home or summerhouse was located and inquired about the national park borders and whether they were inside of them or outside. In contrast to work settings, the object of participation was elusive for participants, its relevance for them personally not immediately apparent. During the participation process, a lot of groundwork had to be done to inform residents and establish a basis for eventually deliberating on national park issues.

The institution governing the development of the national park and thus also the participation process was elusive to residents as well. They had no prior dealings with the people (and organization) soliciting their opinions about what was essentially their living environment and often their property (large parts of the park are privately owned). Rather than belonging to the national park, people feel a belonging to the municipality they are paying taxes to and go to for citizen service provision. Without a feeling of belonging and being able to influence the process of change, commitment of participants decreases.

Beyond the object of participation and the governing organization, other peers in the process are similarly elusive. Citizens were not aware of others, their activities and motivations. Their own actions may have been similarly opaque to others. While in work settings participants have more or less defined roles and are embedded in a more or less formal organization, this is

not the case in the park. Here, beyond a categorization into vague camps of interest, e.g. in terms of belonging (permanent residents, summerhouse owners, visitors), it is difficult to know who is exactly involved in the process. There are not as clear roles one could identify people with in leisure settings as there are in work.

Lastly, citizens went about their 'participation' activities in their very own ways. Rather than participating through our slightly formalized and rational means, people very frequently expressed their own position, their hopes and worries very affectively in the form of personal stories, of 'tales' how things used to be and how they preferably should be again. This primarily involved worries of how the national park might affect them personally (in this particular instance due to negative experiences with similar developments in the area earlier). This potentially leads to an approach, where such stories are shared and the sharing of such stories about the area and its development interwoven with their everyday (social) life.

#### **CONSEQUENCES FOR SUPPORTING PARTICIPATION**

Summing up, in non-work settings people behave highly idiosyncratic according to their own agendas, have only an elusive understanding of their peers and the governing organization, and exhibit a lower degree of commitment on particular topics. We thus propose that participation in non-work settings must be achieved by interweaving it with people's everyday leisure activities.

Facebook is an example of a technology that supports e.g. political parties or grass-root movements to create awareness of their cause by interviewing their message in a stream of other everyday, leisure-related information. Facebook provides commitment to a cause with very little effort. The participant can react to statements, and see some superficial information about peers and potentially fairly easily communicate with them. However, social networks are just one example of a technology that allows this kind of interweaving.

For providing participation opportunities in local communities such as the park one could exploit the activity of accessing a free wireless network in a popular local café or community centre. We already see ad-supported free wifi, where access is granted e.g. after watching a 30-second advertisement. In a community centre this mechanism could rather be used for encouraging civic participation. Even technically, when connecting to a free wifi network one is connecting to a *local* area network rather than the Internet directly as generally perceived. Exploiting this fact, that was more prominent in the earlier days, in order to support co-located participation and reconnect to the local community and people's everyday social life through networking technology is an interesting direction for future research. It extends the notion of mobile in-situ deliberation explored in the national park case to further support participation in local communities.

#### **CONCLUSION**

Non-work settings differ from work-settings in the level of participant's commitment and their understanding of their peers. This affects the way we need to support ongoing participation in people's lives. We suggest exploring ways to interweave participation with people's everyday idiosyncratic activities rather than having it stand on its own.

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