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The Tyranny of Participation in Information Systems: *Learning from Development Projects*

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The Tyranny of Participation in Information Systems: *Learning from Development Projects*

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Abstract

It often seems that use of participative approaches in the development of information systems (IS) has reached the status of a new orthodoxy: a ‘magic bullet’ technique that is always relevant, always beneficial in trying to overcome the high failure rate of information systems. Yet participation is clearly not so magical in practice and is often beset by problems. This paper sets out to investigate and understand some of these problems. It does so by recognising the parallels between debate on the role and value of participation in information systems development, and debate on the role and value of participation in development projects more generally¹. These projects aim to deliver development goals and they have frequently involved participation. They therefore provide fertile ground for learning about approaches to information systems development. Participation is seen to fail in such projects because it ignores context; because it is itself ignored; because it ignores reality; and because it ignores other factors. Based on this analysis, a more critical approach to participation in IS projects is suggested, with three critical questions identified that must be answered before participation can be considered.

¹ Much of the latter debate was informed by a symposium held by the Institute for Development Policy and Management at the University of Manchester in November 1998. A book from this symposium, entitled ‘Participation: The New Tyranny?’ is to be published shortly. Further details can be obtained from the editors, Bill Cooke (bill.cooke@man.ac.uk) or Uma Kothari (uma.kothari@man.ac.uk).

Problems of Participation

Participation has become a 'container concept' (Musch 1998): so broad as to cover a multitude of approaches and techniques. Participation can thus mean many things. For example, one can participate in providing information; in decision making; in implementation of decisions; and in evaluation of those implemented decisions.

Like 'motherhood and apple pie', participation defies tight definition, yet is regarded as a 'good thing'. It thus attains the status of a new mantra amongst development agencies, despite limited hard evidence of success of participation (Clever 1998). Its mantra status is confirmed by the fact that most debate has settled into discussion about different participative techniques rather than a deeper or continuous questioning of the value of participation *per se*.

Yet that deeper questioning reveals a number of problematic aspects of participation, where it ignores or is ignored.

Ignoring Context

Participation is often undertaken without considering the political and cultural context within which it seeks to take place: 'participatory processes have been increasingly approached as technical, management solutions to what are basically political issues' (Gujit and Shah 1998:3). In particular, there are clear cases in development contexts where participation is not participation: where the culture and politics of an organisation prevent apparently participative processes producing truly participative

outcomes by constraining who can say what and how within any kind of group activity (Biggs and Smith 1998). For IS projects, this suggests that there will be contexts in which participation is not a viable technique, and where attempts to introduce it will fail. Participation cannot therefore be viewed as a universalisable technique.

Veneered participation. Because of the orthodoxy of participation, however, organisations often feel forced to create a veneer of participation even if they perceive it to be contextually non-viable. They may do this in order, for example, to please those who are funding a project; with this veneer covering a reality of more top-down, authoritarian approaches to decision-making. In such organisations there may be constant reference to theories and models of participation as guiding principles when, in fact, they do not guide actual practice. In some cases, this veneer is erected to cover decision-making processes that are ‘organisationally recognised’ as being more effective or efficient. In other cases, though, the veneer may be a cover for the attainment of personal objectives by one or two powerful actors. In understanding apparently participative IS projects it is therefore necessary to ‘scratch beneath the surface’ and see whether there is any real sense of participation in those projects.

Inequitable participation. There can be a mistaken assumption that the process of participation breaks down existing inequalities. In practice, political context suffuses participation. Outcomes of supposedly participative processes are frequently dominated by those individuals who are themselves powerful through position, knowledge, etc. or who are representatives of powerful groups or who, more prosaically, have the power of being publicly articulate. One well-observed finding has been the lack of input from women in processes that outwardly appear participative (Mohan 1998). Particular mention can also be made of the role of external facilitators

and their powerful ability to steer apparently participative processes and to shape decision outcomes.

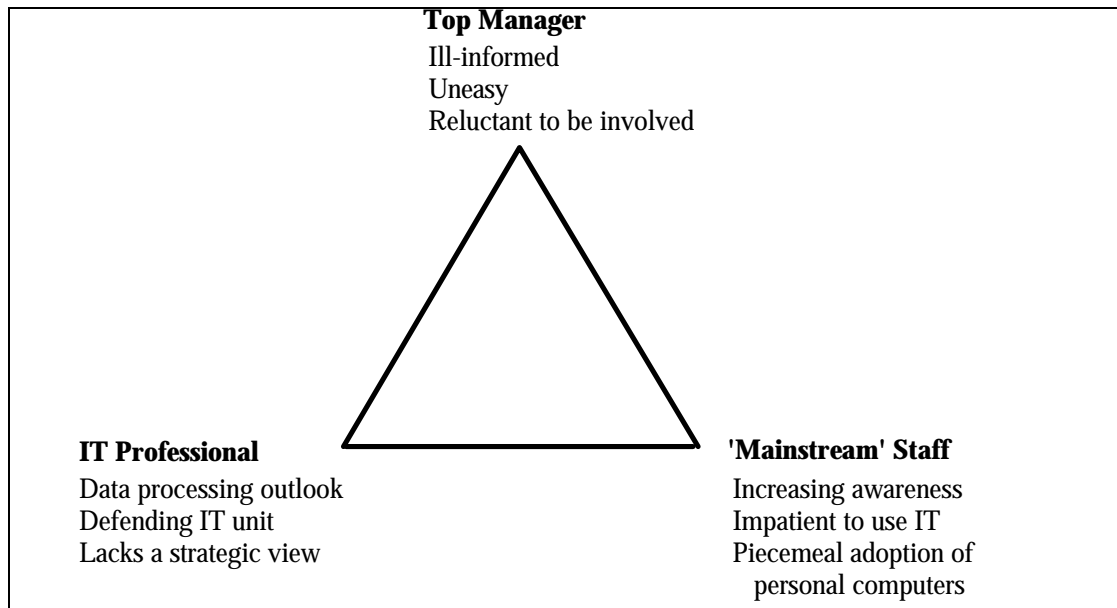
Skewed participation. Inequality may arise even before participation itself has begun in the way that representatives are selected to ‘participate in participation’.

Membership is often skewed towards the powerful and away from the marginalised.

This happens both through nomination and self-selection of members. It can, for instance, bias IS participation towards managerial secondary users and away from clerical primary users.

Non-communicative participation. Participative groups and processes tend to reproduce their political and cultural context. One consequence is the inability of representatives from different stakeholder groupings to empathise and communicate with each other. In the IS project process, this is seen most strongly around the ‘ITernal triangle’ (Knight and Silk 1990 - see Figure 1) that recognises the separate cultures, mindsets and even language of three groups: a) senior managers; b) IT staff; and c) mainstream staff and users. Consequences of their non-communication include delays, misunderstandings and inappropriate design or implementation.

Figure 1. The 'ITernal Triangle' of Gaps Between Different Staff



Career-enhancing participation. The use of participation may reflect the personal agendas of one or two powerful staff rather than the needs of the project or organisation. Those who introduce participation into their projects will often see their careers boosted – and may even go on as consultants to sell the skills and techniques of participation to other organisations – regardless of the success or failure of the initial project (Mosse 1998).

Ignoring Participation

Because participation has become the new mantra, it is often introduced in a top-down, blueprint manner. This may preclude true participation, as already suggested by many of the acontextual approaches described above.

Indicative/token participation. Where participation is merely a token – perhaps a presence more for external than for internal consumption – there may be an obsession with the institutions and overt indicators of participation, such as committees and meetings, rather than the process and outcomes of participation (Cleaver 1998). Mere membership of such committees, mere attendance at meetings is equated with successful participation. Projects therefore claim to be successful by demonstrating an appearance of participation rather than by demonstrating achievement of participative outcomes. Such token participation is normally not part of any wider or longer-term process of empowerment. For an IS project, the outcomes are little better than those achieved by top-down diktat. Indeed, the outcomes may be worse if, for instance, user groups are disappointed by the tokenism and thus become alienated from the IS development process.

Bureaucratic participation. Very similar is the bureaucratic approach to participation, or ‘participation by numbers’: a checklist approach that fails to create any true process of empowerment or involvement. One example of this is ‘bean-counting participation’ that requires one representative of each perceived existing structure or grouping to be present, regardless of the validity or impact of such representation. For IS projects this may create dysfunctional teams that are unable to produce the required decisions and outputs.

Injurious participation. Top-down, bureaucratic participation may impose rigid formal structures on pre-existing flexible informal truly participative structures, thereby submerging the latter. Formal committees and meetings can jeopardise longer-term, carefully-crafted relationships between existing stakeholders (Hailey 1998). If imposed, participation may also be seen as a powerful and demotivating ‘vote of no

confidence' in existing IS staff and their methods. Participation seems especially likely to be injurious in this way if it is 'alien participation': introduced as a technique by outsiders, such as consultants. This undermines the ability of organisational groups to take responsibility themselves for change generally and for IS development more specifically, thereby increasing their external dependence (Mohan 1998).

Ignoring Reality

As already described, supposedly participative approaches may ignore the realities of context and the realities of poor outcomes. Reality may also be ignored in other ways.

Resource-deficit participation. Those introducing participation can make a mistaken assumption about the innate resourcefulness of individuals and groups: assuming that they are latently capable and resourced and that these capacities merely need to be uncovered through participation. In reality, this is not so. Members of organisations, like members of communities, often have heavy existing workloads and have no time to invest in new processes of participation. Where they do participate, there are frequent cases of stress and burnout (Dockery 1998).

There are equally a significant set of required capabilities for those who would take part in participative processes: to absorb information; to put forward a viewpoint publicly; to take decisions; to implement decisions; to evaluate decisions; etc. In reality, individuals may lack these capabilities.

Inefficient participation. Even where there are no resource deficits, participation may deny the reality of its resource costs. In practice, participation – which can be a

substantial consumer of time, effort and money – may be far less efficient than a well-communicated top-down decision that could be equally acceptable to most stakeholders. There is a constant danger that participative groups may invest heavily to produce an information system that is no better (or even – see below – is worse) than one produced much more efficiently by less democratic means.

Rational non-participation. There may be a mistaken assumption about the presence of a further resource: motivation. It seems generally assumed that engagement in participation is the only rational approach that individuals can adopt; that there is no such thing as a rational choice not to participate in a decision-making process or an IS development process.

In reality, it may often be rational for individuals not to participate. This may be so even where the decision outcomes are of interest, if someone else will make and implement decisions that will be beneficial, or at least acceptable, to the individual without requiring them to invest time and effort. Even more, where the individual is not interested in the decision or outcome, it is rational not to participate.

The result of this mistaken assumption can be top-down imposition of participation on individuals or groups who resent this. Participation in common projects – such as an organisation-wide information system – can be seen as a constraint by some individuals, who feel bound by common goals and actions that they do not share. For these individuals, it is more empowering not to participate since this leaves them free to pursue their own agenda.

Groupthink participation. Participation generally means working in groups, and the reality of group working is not always positive. Cooke (1998) describes three potentially negative outcomes:

- Risky shift: the tendency of some groups to take more risky decisions than those that they would have taken as individuals. Where risk-taking is valued, groups diffuse responsibility and allow, for instance, participative processes to endorse IS designs that are excessively prone to failure.
- The Abilene paradox: the ability of some groups to produce an apparent consensus that no member actually desired or supported, through misperception (“But I thought that’s what everyone else wanted”). Groups can agree to proceed with information systems that no-one wants; particularly in situations of risk aversion and cultures of not speaking out or of not speaking plainly and openly.
- Groupthink: the ability of some groups to become insular and isolated from reality, and therefore to take decisions which are either unrealistic or are damaging to those outside the group. Where potentially participative groups come to think of themselves as special, different, and ‘above the rest’, they may start to plan information systems regardless of the real-world consequences.

Ignoring Other Factors

Post-modern participation: ignoring rigour. There can be a mistaken conflation of participation with the post-modern view that all perspectives are of equal value, or even with the view that there should be a categorical rejection of formality and structure. This, in turn, can mean a rejection of rigour in decision making and action. There can be deification of personal feelings and opinions that ignores more structural,

systemic, environmental factors that need to be considered. With information systems, this may materialise in the idea that having a talking shop about the IS is good enough and that any kind of rigorous analysis, design or implementation can be – indeed should be – rejected.

‘Let it all hang out’ participation: ignoring confidentiality. A necessary part of ‘proper participation’ can be seen as a requirement to bring all issues and all feelings out into the open. In the first place this is clearly alien to many organisational cultures. Secondly, secrets have their value in all contexts. ‘Letting it all hang out’ can have negative impacts of increasing disagreement and conflict within the organisation, making a positive outcome of participation less rather than more likely.

Conclusions

From the discussion above, one can differentiate:

- a) *operational constraints*: that make participation hard to achieve in some or most situations, and
- b) *inherent problems*: that emerge even when participation does take place.

Despite all these criticisms and shortcomings, participation will remain an important tool in the IS development toolkit. Not surprisingly, then, new and refined techniques

are still suggested to cope with both the identified constraints and problems. For example:

- Focusing on group formation of the IS development team more than the outcomes of participation, given that good decision-making comes from mutual understanding and trust.
- ‘Walking and talking’: getting IS decision makers on a long-term basis to understand and be trusted by stakeholder groups. This to be achieved by having those decision makers get out, walk around and talk constantly with the groups.
- Focusing on a longer-term, deeper approach to empowerment within the organisation, of which participation would be just one part. Thus, attempting to shift organisation-wide factors such as structures and culture rather than just attempting to ‘bolt on’ participation to IS projects.

More generally, it is clear that participation needs to be approached far more critically and without the assumption that it will always and necessarily bring benefits either to development projects generally or to IS development projects more specifically.

“It is important to look at what is going on *around* the techniques themselves if, as suggested here, the main determinants of outcomes lie not with the choice of method but with the institutions and protagonists in which those choices are made.” (Biggs and Smith 1998:245)

This therefore suggests three key questions must be asked where participation is being considered.

1. What is the political and cultural context?

As noted, it seems likely that this context determines IS and other outcomes more than the particular approach or techniques – participative or otherwise – that are utilised. Discussion and diffusion of politico-cultural analysis tools may therefore be of greater value in the IS domain than the minutiae of participative or technical analysis techniques.

2. Who wants to introduce participation, and why?

Those initiating participation may be motivated by a desire to offload IS responsibilities and workloads onto others, or by a desire to achieve certain career goals. This is obviously less likely to be successful than the situation where participation is driven by a desire to improve IS decision-making and increase the ownership of those decisions.

3. Who is participation sought from? Do they want to, and can they, participate?

Similarly, from the perspective of potential participants, their motivations and resources are central. Where they lack a good reason to participate in an IS project and/or where they lack the resources to participate, participation failure is the likely outcome.

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