

COMMUNITIES IN ACTION: A MULTIDISCIPLINARY TAKE ON AGENCY AND PARTICIPATION IN A COMMUNAL PROJECT

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a multidisciplinary take on how participation and agency may be enhanced through participatory design and decision-making methods in a relatively established but nevertheless mutable and variable community, in a university environment. The paper reports on an ongoing project in which research on various aspects of community is carried out along a participatory process. In the project, the overall research approach of nexus analysis was applied, supported with the particular research method of conversation analysis, and data were gathered using a selection of means, e.g. through participant observation and video recordings of a design workshop. In the workshop, the methods of participatory design, participatory decision-making and agile retrospectives were applied. The paper offers new insight into the applicability of participatory methods in designing for social change in an institutional environment and feeds back to the participatory methods via the nexus and conversational analyses of social action.

INTRODUCTION

Higher-education institutions in Finland have undergone several organisational changes during the last decade (including a reform of the national Universities Act, see www.minedu.fi/OPM). For our case community, this meant that a university department ceased to exist as an independent unit and became a subject area directly under a faculty within the university. We have witnessed how the change has affected, among other things, the ways in which administrative duties are divided and run among members of staff: instead of communicating with a departmental secretary, for example, students may now seek information and support in service centres that are intended for students across all subject areas within the faculty, and possibly also across faculties. Furthermore, whereas a traditional noticeboard outside the departmental office previously served as a kind of a hotspot for many study-related matters, most of these (e.g. sign-up for courses, release of examination results and submission of theses) are now taken care of online through various portals. In our initial view, then, the centralization of student services may in effect have dispersed the activities that, to a certain extent at least, brought students and members of staff together and helped to maintain a sense of community. Additionally, the status of postgraduate students in this setting is complex: some have offices and teaching duties and may identify as staff members, while others work from home and may be only loosely connected to the university. Both of these are issues that, to our understanding, are regularly taken up in formal and informal meetings among those involved, most often as matters of complaint.

This multilayered and dispersed nature of the community, in which we have functioned as postgraduate students and staff members (and previously, undergraduate students), inspired us to begin

a project to explore how we could utilise the methods of participatory design and participatory decision-making to discover whether the members of the community see this as a concern and whether there is something these methods could bring to create positive change. The idea was to facilitate a process where the community itself defines the content of the concept of community, its functions and how the potential members of the community themselves would like to engage in it and, in turn, engage others.

We began with the assumptions that the members of the community identify themselves as such; that there is some underlying need to reconnect the members dispersed by organisational changes; and that new methods for asking questions might bring about new methods of being together for the community. We employ nexus analysis, an ethnographic research strategy, to gain fresh viewpoints into participatory design, and we use the method of conversation analysis for detailed analyses of the video-recorded face-to-face interaction that results from the participatory design process.

PROJECT PREMISE

Our initial premise for the project was a desire to explore the potential of participatory design methods for creating new ways of being together for the community. This premise was based on three elements: an existing research interest in ‘community’; our personal histories as members of this particular community; and our combined expertise in participatory design and methods for studying discourse and social action.

Community as a term is much used to describe a variety of aspects of human togetherness, and as shorthand to denote various kinds of human groupings (Delanty, 2003). In this article, we also use community as a practical term to refer to the group of individuals involved in the case. However, our understanding is also underpinned by a theoretical understanding of the concept of community. First and foremost, we view our case community as a *community of practice* (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Scollon, 2001) built around the studying, teaching and research activities related to English Philology at the University of Oulu, Finland. These activities serve to bring together particular groups of individuals on a daily basis, in various configurations: students attending classes taught by staff, staff engaging in research activities together, postgraduate students meeting supervisors, and so on. These activities are based on the learned practices of teaching, studying, doing research and being “at university” in general. These practices are the central point around which the design workshop as well as our analysis revolves.

Our understanding of community is further influenced by theoretical thinking on the *experience* of community, specifically the psychological theory of *sense of community* (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). According to this widely employed theory, sense of community is

based on feelings of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection among the members of a community. In our starting discussions, we linked the theory of sense of community to the notion of agency (Latour, 2005; Jones & Norris, 2005); we shared an assumption that many members of the community would not feel they had agency in the activities and organisation of the community, which would also hamper their feelings of membership, being able to influence the community, and having their needs met. It should also be noted that our own participation in the design workshop, which was centred around the participants’ ideas of the “ideal community”, was influenced by this understanding of community experiences.

Our overlapping roles as community members, researchers and designers served both to inspire us to begin the project and to complicate it. In ethnographic terms, we had years of participant observation data on which to base our initial problem formulation. At the same time, we sensed that our position as long-term members of the community could hamper the design process as we were at risk of forming fixed opinions and foregone conclusions early on. Therefore, in order to encourage objectivity and a reflexive attitude, we refrained from too specific a definition of problem areas at the start of the project, and chose to move ahead with as open-ended a formulation as possible: we would simply focus on observing how the community functions, and attempt through the design process to direct it to some kind of “positive change”. Our own ideas of positive change revolved around ameliorating the lack of cohesion caused by organisational changes, and increasing agency (and therefore, sense of community) for all members of the community, but rather than turning these into explicit goals for the workshop, we endeavoured to allow space for other ideas to emerge during the workshop.

RESEARCH APPROACH AND METHODS

Our entire approach is underpinned by our interest in human social interaction and an ethnographic orientation to research. Our expertise in nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) directed our focus to the practices that make up the community, and the experiences, histories and structures that keep the community functioning as it does. Our expertise in conversation analysis further enabled us to pay particular attention to the interaction, taking place as series of shared moments in everyday life, that serves to construct our understandings of our community and our roles in it. However, the key to this project was the design expertise, gained in industry, which made our approach possible. The participatory design process we engaged in, and its theoretical basis, is described in more detail further below; first, we will introduce the analytic research framework of our study by discussing the basic principles of nexus analysis and their applicability in this project.

Nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004) is an ethnographic research strategy that employs discourse analysis and other methods flexibly to study social action. The defining feature of nexus analysis is the way in which it views social action: each social action is seen to be mediated by the *interaction order* among participants, that is, the relationships and power structures among the participants; the *historical bodies* – previous knowledge, experience, attitudes and assumptions – that the participants bring into the action; and the *discourses in place*, that is, the discourses that are associated with or embedded in the scene of the action. Nexus analysis unifies the two analytical levels of discourse analysis by undertaking the micro-analysis of unfolding moments of social interaction combined with a broader socio-political-cultural analysis of the relationships among social groups and power interests in society (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 8). This way of viewing social action enables us to uncover the elements that make our case community function the way it does: in our analysis we demonstrate how the habitual roles, relationships and practices of the community members affect the progress and results of the whole process, and the workshop in particular. Thus nexus analysis enables us to connect the unfolding moments of interaction to the wider view of the participatory design process as a tool for designing for social change.

In nexus analytic research, participant observation is employed as the primary tool for collecting data: the researcher is positioned as a full participant and therefore an agent of change in the social action being studied. Change is seen as an inevitable result of the interaction that the participants of the research project engage in, and change is also construed as one of the goals of nexus analysis, which often has an activist agenda. In the present project, we wished to leave space for the participants to bring up their own notions of what the community needs, but at the same time, we were aware of our own existing understandings of how community experiences are created. The nexus analytic approach allowed us to negotiate our overlapping roles as researchers and designers with existing understandings and opinions, and co-participants in the community being studied, and the varying levels of agency this accorded us in running as well as participating in the process: as workshop participants we worked from the same premise as our fellow community members, while as analysts and designers we had access to special knowledge which the others did not have. Our research approach allowed us to become aware of our unique position in the process, without feeling constrained by this awareness: we viewed our knowledge of community building and design processes as simply beneficial to the successful completion of the project.

In addition to the participant observation we performed as researchers, designers and participants in the design process, we collected additional data through surveys, a notebook placed in the students' common room, and

most importantly, the design workshop organised in February 2015. The workshop was video recorded and conversation analysis was then employed to examine the recordings and focus on key interactions, along with the wider viewpoints of nexus analysis (see, e.g. Keisanen & Kuure, 2011, on how nexus analysis and conversation analysis have previously been employed in a single study). The purpose of the conversation-analytic method in this project was to find out how participation is accomplished in situ (e.g. Goodwin & Goodwin, 2004) and how the community may, in a sense, be “talked into being” (Heritage, 1984).

Following the basic principles of conversation analysis, we first identified certain key moments of interaction and then examined them carefully as they unfold turn by turn. We viewed, transcribed and analysed the video material amongst ourselves and also brought data excerpts to a so-called data session where a group of researchers discussed them together. The members of the community who participated in the data session were interested not only in the pursuit of the actions from the workshop, but also in the workshop as a method of engaging the community. In this way, the data session also worked as another opportunity for relevant participant observation.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationship between the analytical research process and the participatory design process.

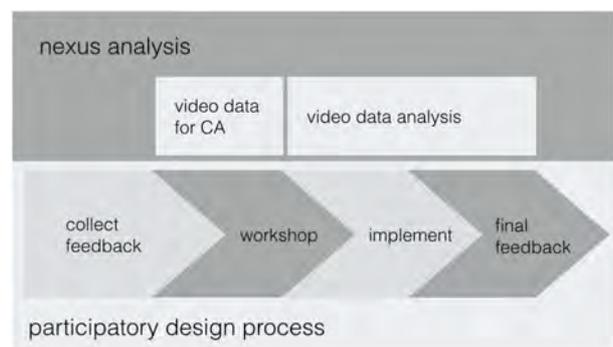


Figure 1: Nexus analysis and participatory design in the project

DESIGNING SOCIAL ACTION

We now turn to describing the participatory design process itself. We begin by discussing our theoretical basis for the design of the process, followed by a description of the process as it was executed in practice.

BACKGROUND

Participatory design is not a novel idea but stems from the social and political movements of the 1960s and 70s when people in Western societies started to demand a say in decision-making related to their own lives. Much of the discussion and writing related to participatory design centres around technologies or technology-enabled systems, but in our view there is no reason to limit the creativity of our group to technologies but to refer more broadly to collaborative processes driven by the people who will be affected by what is being

designed. The heart of it is not rules or strict definitions but more a commitment to the core principles of participation in design and respecting the participants' agency in shaping their environment (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013).

What makes this specific project different from the more typical product projects where participatory design is applied is the fact that this project explicitly addresses the social action, identification and agency of the community itself as the product the community attempts to redesign. Battarbee's (2006) thinking of experience and co-experience helps open up this complexity; to her, experiencing is a constructive activity where an experience turns into *experience as storytelling* via processes of cognition, narrative and storytelling while co-experiencing is the user experience created in social interaction (Battarbee, 2006: 50, 121). In the context of community, the place (e.g. university, faculty, subject area), the people and the activity related to that place thus create experiences, storytelling experiences and co-experiences for the community participating in this activity. The project attempts, firstly, to find out what those storytelling experiences and co-experiences are or could be, and secondly to apply participatory design methods to incur positive change in the community.

Agency, as the capacity of exerting power is key in participatory design where the intent is to contribute to a greater agency of individuals and communities (Simonsen & Robertson, 2013: 4). We do not view agency as a part of an individual's consciousness, but rather, as something that is "negotiated between individuals and their social worlds" (Jones & Norris, 2005: 170). Agency appears differently depending on the focus of the analyst, and in this project two scales are relevant: the macro-scale of the organisational and administrative structures of the entire university, and the micro-scale of interpersonal power structures and personal experiences affecting how the different members of the community come together in interaction. In practical terms, agency is always presented in an account as doing something, making some difference to a state of affairs (Latour, 2005: 52–56).

DATA COLLECTION

According to the principles of participatory design, the data were collected from the people in the community. The intent was to get the community to define what community means for them, and to get them to offer ideas on how to improve it. These data were used as input for a co-creation workshop where community members designed solutions to improve their community.

The first round of data collection was performed in December 2014. Advertisements were posted on walls and doors around the facilities of the faculty, and emails were sent to the staff and student email lists with an invitation to respond to a questionnaire, and more generally to contribute ideas and discuss the topic on

Twitter, Instagram and Google+. There was very limited engagement: only a few staff members joined and participated in the Google+ community. We estimated this to mean the following: our approach was potentially too vague and the timing problematic, with people focusing on final exams and the upcoming Christmas break. Additionally, even the people who participated did not seem to have much to offer, which could again be a sign of the approach being too vague or there not being any issues to improve in the community. The vagueness was intentional, as we did not want to direct the definition of community or the solutions at this stage, but it also meant it was harder for potential participants to grasp the intent.

For the second round of data collection, we drafted another advertisement to distribute once the staff and students were back in January. The intent was to engage the people more by offering only a direct link to the Google+ community and a new survey with clearer questions focusing on finding out how people get together and find information about what is going on in the faculty and subject area in question. In addition to the digital data collection, we placed a notebook ("activity book") in the undergraduate students' common room in an attempt to further engage the students, and as preparation for the February 2015 workshop, we also started contacting active undergraduate students, postgraduate students and staff members directly. In general, giving names and faces to the team asking for input seemed to boost participation.

Even after the second, more intensive round of data collection, the response was sparse. There were, however, a small number of survey responses and notes in the activity book which supported our original premise that the community appears to be somewhat fragmented: the members do not interact or share common space as a community physically or virtually. Staff reports communicated more cohesiveness than student reports and students also seemed to view information sharing more as information receiving.

WORKSHOP

The workshop was run in February at the University of Oulu, Finland. It was facilitated by Minna Hekanaho applying the methods of participatory design, participatory decision-making and agile retrospectives. In brief, the attempt was to encourage full participation, promote mutual understanding, foster inclusive solutions and cultivate shared responsibility using communication tools such as paraphrasing, gathering ideas, encouraging, making space for a quiet person, validating, linking, listening with a point of view and summarizing (Kaner et al., 2007). Boards and post-it notes were used as a recurring structure to timebox the ideation process and there was less freedom to try out alternative methods of presentation due to the time constraints of the actual workshop. The other two members of the research team, Annamari Martinviita and Mirka Rauniomaa, participated in the workshop in

their roles as postgraduate students, staff members and researchers affiliated with the subject area. The workshop was video-recorded for later analysis and reference.

Although the recruitment process started slowly and was challenged by a few cancellations, we managed to engage a group that was representative and large enough to enable participatory design and decision-making. Altogether, there were ten participants and the facilitator in the workshop, and they represented different roles in the community of English Philology: members of teaching and research staff, postgraduate students and undergraduate students.

In the actual workshop, we used an agile retrospective method called futuroerspective to create the workshop structure. Futuroerspective invites participants to define their ideal future state, midway and a feasible action plan of how to get there (see, e.g. Derby and Larsen, 2006). The futuroerspective process was disrupted by two different inputs from the facilitator: collection of quotes from the data we had received prior to the workshop and slideshow of images of different types of communities. These two inputs were meant to help the participants think firstly of feedback from the community and secondly of other types of communities and ways of working.

The workshop started with introducing the research project and its members, and a warmup exercise where the participants were invited to describe their current feeling on a post-it note. The emotions varied from tired to anxious and curious but in general the participants seemed open-minded for discussion about their own community. After this, we moved onto the first proper step: the definition of an ideal community. The participants were divided into two groups where all the different roles were represented, and their task was to write characteristics of an ideal community on post-it notes. Once the ideas were written down, the participants hung their notes on a board and briefly explained their thinking. Most people saw characteristics such as equality and respect as key to an ideal community. Some even talked about “one”, an organism where we no longer have to communicate because we inherently know.

The second step was to define a realistic version of this ideal. The groups were shuffled but the procedure remained the same: characteristics of a realistic version of a community on post-it notes. Surprisingly enough, the result was almost the same with just the more futuristic ideas left out. For the participants, the idea of community centered around respect, accessibility and common activity in something of a shared space was feasible. At the end of this phase, the participants voted for the most important characteristics which were: responsibility for all, sociality, aware and alert, fun and interaction.

The third step was to work out concrete steps to get to the fifty percent. The groups were shuffled again and

this time, no specific attention was paid to the roles as by now the groups had already shared their ideas across and had been disturbed by the facilitator twice. In mapping the concrete actions, the need for a shared space, in itself and as a starting point for interaction and joint activity, became more and more visible. After the solutions were presented, the participants voted again and picked four to create an action plan for.

The four topics the participants picked were: shared space, shared research activity, brown bag lunches and fun activity. In brief, shared space was a proposal to arrange a common area for staff, postgraduate and undergraduate students to spend time informally and provide access to each others' time. The characteristics of the shared space varied from having locked cabinets to store personal belongings in to a temporary rented space for meetings. Shared research activity referred to joint research projects where staff and more experienced researchers could mentor the students and have them participate and contribute in their research. The student participants saw joint projects as a way of participating in an endeavour larger than what they could do themselves, and listed examples from other faculties where students themselves organise research groups to write their thesis. Brown bag lunch idea started from discussing cooking and eating as low-threshold activity for students and staff alike. Brown bag session refers to a lunch date where anyone can present on a topic of their choice: participants can listen to a presentation while they eat and discuss the topic afterwards. This was seen as an easy way to invite staff and students to get together and have a topic to discuss. The intention was to keep the topics informal so that anyone could become the expert and learn about each other also outside the university context. Fun activity referred to something more informal the students and staff could do together, outside the university premises. The selected topics centred around the main activities the community embarks in, which made them specifically feasible from the viewpoint of engagement.

The final step was to create a concrete action plan for the topics. In order to do this, each topic was assigned a lead, or an accountable person, by the facilitator, and all others were asked to join the lead of their choice.. The lead was responsible for an action plan which we promised to monitor afterwards. All teams had a plan of two actions: basically to organise something towards achieving the topic goal.

From the viewpoint of participatory decision-making, the facilitator started with a less involved stance where the intent was to observe, paraphrase, ask and answer clarifying questions. This approach was used in the first two phases of defining the ideal state and a realistic ideal state. The more concrete and action-oriented the work became, the more involved the facilitator was with the intent of both ironing out the hierarchies of the participants and dividing actions to all roles equally.

The facilitator tried to help participants find solutions outside their internalised framework of limitations. For example, finding a shared space is hard in a rented building of fixed architecture not planned for common activities but rather for individuals working alone, and the participants consistently struck a wall in trying to go beyond their ideal of a shared space and the limitations of the space and the system they occupy. In a similar vein, the initial student suggestion of shared research activity and projects was slightly watered down to supported opportunities to share research projects. In hindsight, the group could have benefitted from a bigger intervention to free their thinking: for example, a short story or an interview with a person from a different type of community could have helped them approach the solutions differently.

ANALYTIC OBSERVATIONS ON THE DESIGN PROCESS

We now turn to analysing the progress and results of the design process from the wider viewpoint of nexus analysis. Of particular interest to us are the elements that we saw shaping the process: the previous experiences and learned practices of all the participants, including ourselves; the relationships among the participants; and the organisational and physical structures, and the discourses and practices associated with those structures. Our analysis is based on participant observation and the data collected as part of the design process, as well as the video data recorded at the workshop, providing conversation-analytic insight. This section assesses the quality of your data. The point of this section is that when outsiders know what you have been doing, they can decide whether they trust your claims or not. Without a methods section, this is not possible.

LEARNED ROLES, ASSUMED RELATIONSHIPS

As previously discussed, our backgrounds as researchers, designers and participants in the community under study had a significant impact on the shape and results of the project. What is more, the community consists of several stakeholder groups that each have their own histories and learned practices guiding their participation in the community. We took this assumption for granted in the early stages of the project; in recruiting participants for the design process, for instance, we were explicitly trying to reach all the key participant groups as we envisioned them: undergraduate students, postgraduate students and members of teaching and research staff. This assumption was later validated by the workshop participants, who evoked the same categorisations in their interaction. Example 1, a simple transcript of a brief excerpt of video data, illustrates this. (We appear here with our own names; all other participants have been given pseudonyms.)

01 MIN: okay, uhm, your team? yes?
 02 ANS: (--) will begin?
 03 STE: (good question)
 04 LII: well we had uh fun equals everyday life.
 05 so we thought that er,
 06 it wouldn't have to be sort of special fun.
 07 er, but ehm, fun should be embedded into whatever we do.
 08 so, part of everyday (--)
 ((eight lines of transcript omitted))
 09 STE: so because we also had this one,
 10 X: (--)
 11 LII: mm,
 12 STE: outdoor events,
 13 HEN: or events in general. like all kinds of activities together.
 14 LII: mm,
 15 MIN: mhm, yes?
 16 LII: we're thinking that erm,
 17 HEN: get-togethers. in other words.
 18 MIN: yes.
 19 LII: Caio eve- evenings are one sort of activity,
 20 but it uh discriminates already, quite a few people?
 21 X: mm
 22 LII: people who cannot be there after office hours,
 23 ANN: like well, we talked about having like,
 24 LII: mm,
 25 ANN: not every month,
 26 LII: yeah,
 27 ANN: uh a Caio evening but,
 28 like having a kind of an end-of-term party for example.

Transcript 1: Ideas from teams: fun activities (forum 01:28:34)

While the workshop facilitator, Minna, addresses the participants as *teams* (line 01, and elsewhere in the data as *you* or as individuals by using the participants' names) and thus, in a sense, positions herself outside of the community, the participants refer to themselves as *we* when reporting on the work of their team (line 04 onward). The reporting itself is also carried out as a team effort, with the participants building on, reformulating and complementing each other's contributions (lines 12–17 in particular). However, when talking about possible joint activities, the participants begin to foresee potential problems that may be related to the roles that members of the community occupy: in lines 19–22 of Example 1, Liisa points out that *Caio evenings*, i.e. the kinds of pub nights that have been organised in the past, are problematic because of their timing – for members of staff who cannot make it *after office hours*. The participants seem in this way to orient not only to the roles that may be available for members of the community, but also to the types of activities that those roles are connected to.

Furthermore, while the relationship between undergraduate students and staff – variably conceived of

as teachers and as researchers – arose as the most salient in the workshop discussions, the position of postgraduate students was less clear, as shown by Example 2. Samppa has just introduced sports games as a possible joint activity, drawing on his school experiences of baseball championships between teachers and pupils.

01 SAM: maybe we could play mölkkky, or, some smaller game,
02 ((displays of agreement by others))
03 SAM: and, maybe make it into a championship,
04 MIN: yeah,
05 SAM: or something, that the winner gets the title,
06 ((laughter))
07 MIN: and a huge ((makes a wave with hands))
08 SAM: yeah.
09 ANN: yeah, maybe the PhD students can be like the judges.
10 ((laughter))
11 MIN: maybe you can be both (types).
12 ANS: why. no. ((laughing))
13 ((laughter))
14 LI: no way.
15 ((laughter))
16 ANS: let's compete.

Transcript 2: Ideas from teams: mölkkky championship (forum 02:28:37)

Samppa's idea is received with vocal displays of agreement and encouraging nods. Throughout his reminiscing, Samppa has indicated that in their school championships teachers and pupils were in opposing teams and, up until this point in the present discussion, two categories have similarly been evoked, namely those of undergraduate students and members of staff. Here, Annamari brings up another category of members in the community, PhD students (line 09). It is interesting to note what roles Annamari and Minna (here acting as the facilitator), who both have a postgraduate status at the university, propose for members of this new category: Annamari proposes that they adopt another role available in the activities (i.e. *the judges*, line 09) and Minna both of the roles already established (*maybe you can be both (types)*, line 11). In this way, the complex position of postgraduate students is implicitly introduced into the discussion and, in Anssi's and Liisa's responses (lines 12, 14 and 16), is further elaborated on as, indeed, not being subsumable to either of the two other categories but being of equal importance nonetheless (as far as sports games are concerned at least).

At the same time, the workshop brought people out of their separate roles somewhat and, when ideating in mixed teams (see Example 1), enabled them to work from a "we" perspective that included all of the community members, as represented by the workshop participants. According to our observation, this inclusive "we" was not a new concept to the

participants, but the results of the workshop suggest that there are few opportunities for the community members to come together as a unified group, as we had assumed from the beginning. This was further discussed in the data session which introduced the workshop activity to some staff members who had not been present: a senior staff member confirmed that there is no organisational structure present in the current set-up which would enable cooperation among the different member groups in the way that the workshop did. The participants in the data session saw the workshop as a promising new method of working that could increase our feelings of community.

Indeed, all of the actionable items collected in the workshop were geared towards breaking down barriers to togetherness: shared space providing access to members of the different subgroups and enabling coexperience; shared research activity as a space for teaching and learning and contributing to the common research goals; the brown bag lunches where the roles of teacher and student become blurred as anyone can be an expert; and the free time get-togethers where the important task was to find something everyone could enjoy. Thus it was clear that the members of the community are very eager to spend time together. What the design process highlighted were the barriers that existed.

WHAT CAN WE DO IN THIS SPACE?

Space arose as a key element both in the organisation of the workshop as well as the discussions that the workshop participants engaged in. The discussions highlighted just how concretely the physical space directs social action and limits the possibilities of how it can be arranged. Apart from offices, generally occupied by 1–2 staff members or postgraduate students each, the activities of the community take place in classrooms and lecture halls. There are a few rooms also assigned as meeting spaces (mostly for staff), and the student association has its own guild room, used only by the undergraduate students. These spaces are all strictly configured for the type of activity they are designed for, through furniture selection (e.g. desks and meeting-room tables) and organisation (placement of whiteboards, projectors and other technology) and cannot be easily reconfigured. Particular activities and discourses are also associated with each space, so that it is difficult to conceive of organising a relaxed social occasion in a meeting room or class room, for example.

In effect, each space that the community occupies comes with its own extensive historical body. The university building was constructed at a time when many researchers worked alone and teachers preferred to be segregated from students into their own offices and break-room facilities, and since the construction is fixed, it seems difficult to rearrange the action to match more modern ways of working. The architecture is protective (of individuals, of their knowledge) and does not encourage teamwork and sharing in the same way as

more open and collaborative spaces do, for example, with walls available for different types of information sharing.

The architecture does not completely prevent rearranging social action; the workshop participants were able to create some solutions for new ways of being together despite the space restraints. However, we observed an obvious resistance among the participants towards more radical re-imaginings of the university space, and we feel that more coaching is needed on this point if the community wants to move towards a more collaborative culture. This is one area where the limits to agency were clear: the workshop participants were of one mind in their awareness that they had no power over the physical structures of the university, not only in terms of the architecture but of usage rights: the space is rented so any usage of space comes with an invoice which someone has to approve and pay.

Space restraints were also very relevant to the running of the workshop itself. It should be noted that the demands for shared space are not new, and have not gone unnoticed by the university administration. In recent years, several new shared spaces have been made available via remodelling of the available structures. The workshop was run in a flexible space that can be used for meetings of different sizes and for collecting audio and video data of those meetings. It allowed us to run the workshop in varying group configurations and use a combination of old and new technologies. Nevertheless, this space also had its constraints: the space has to be reserved in advance, the use of some flexible structures needs to be negotiated beforehand and some activities that may be integral to joint activities, such as eating and drinking, are only allowed in a lobby area next to the space.

It should be noted that at the beginning of the project, we had envisaged a virtual community as a tool or a solution for the missing noticeboard. But as we progressed with the process, the virtual solutions we offered were not getting any traction among the participants. In general, face-to-face communication was preferred and the participants seemed more interested in both formal and informal but physical ways of working and spending time together. Thus we have to conclude that the lack of available spaces for the different members of the community to meet in an open-ended way is a key obstacle in bringing the community closer together.

RESULTS

Our findings prior to the workshop seemed to indicate a lack of interest within the community to engage in talking about the community. We had begun the project with an assumption that, given the opportunity, the community would find areas of improvement to work on together. Multiple official channels for providing feedback or seeking help in problem situations exist, but we observed a lack of a common arena for group

interaction within the community, where discussion would not be limited to problems and negative issues. Our aim then became to try to create such a common arena, and to explore new ways of coming together to work on developing the community.

It was our aim from the beginning specifically to refrain from the drawing of any lines between the different groups within the community. We wished to give space to the concerns of all the parties, and to bring people together to discuss all their issues together, rather than adhering to the usual division of labour, with staff responsible for issues of teaching and research, and students responsible for social activities. Thus, the questions we asked and the topics we proposed were purposely broad, and we did not specify benefits from participating more particular than “finding ways to bring our community closer together”. With hindsight, this may have limited our responses; although people appeared interested in the project in principle, in practice they had little to contribute due to the vagueness of the questions.

Regardless of the small number of responses prior to the workshop, we were able to recruit a suitable number of participants from all the groups within the community, and although the participants continued to express confusion and curiosity at the beginning of the workshop, as soon as a clear purpose for the activity was defined, the participants became highly engaged in the process. We therefore feel that our strategy of openness was successful: our advertising had not associated the process with any existing official processes of planning or collecting feedback, and this allowed the participants to enter the workshop with an open mind. Moreover, we had not associated ourselves with any official organising body that would ordinarily organise such events, and participation was completely voluntary. We did not assume the agency and power that an official body would typically have, which contributed to the egalitarian nature of the workshop: although the participants brought into the workshop an awareness of their roles within the community, there was no hierarchy present within the workshop. We saw all the participants voicing their thoughts freely and contributing to the process in a manner that seemed unconstrained by any existing practices of taking part in the more typical official processes. In our opinion, this was key to giving the participants agency, not only within the workshop, but within the whole community. Although their agency was limited in issues of space and the organisational structures of the university, the participants were eager to create solutions that worked around those limitations.

The workshop offered a rare opportunity for the different parts of the community to come together and discuss shared issues free of the long-established structures of collecting feedback and planning future activities. The participants were also encouraged to take

responsibility for activities outside the scope of their learned roles: staff members could organise opportunities for socialising through the provision of shared space, just as undergraduate students could empower themselves to invite the whole community to spend time together during brown bag lunches.

VISIONS OF THE FUTURE

In this paper, we have explored how opportunities of participation and issues of agency may be identified and enhanced in a relatively rigid and almost monolithic environment such as the university. During our project, we have again witnessed how participants' previous experiences, their historical bodies and learned practices, guide their actions and how they may be constrained by existing structures – both physical and mental – of their surroundings. Nevertheless, we noticed that, when appropriately encouraged, members of the community can also test and cross those constraints, even if only momentarily at first.

Because the project is still ongoing, we wish to conclude this paper with three visions of the future:

1. To help engage the community more, participatory design workshops should be arranged regularly and different methods should be applied to coach the community towards their desired direction. This way of facilitating organisational change would need to be integrated in the community's current processes to ensure some continuity when individual members leave or join the community. New students with fresh viewpoints could be integrated into the workshop process by giving them the topics and actions to work from and arrange.
2. The community seemed to benefit from external facilitation. Applying the more agile ways of working from design, software development and private sector could be trialled also in the humanities, but the external facilitator could just as well come from some other field. In general, multidisciplinary process development should be practiced as much as multidisciplinary research.
3. Different pilots could be arranged to try out some of the proposals made by workshop participants. For example, shared research projects could be incorporated into the course schedule. This would require staff contribution in a way that is not trivial as there are a lot of resource constraints currently. It could, however, bring forth synergies that are not existing in the current setup.

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