

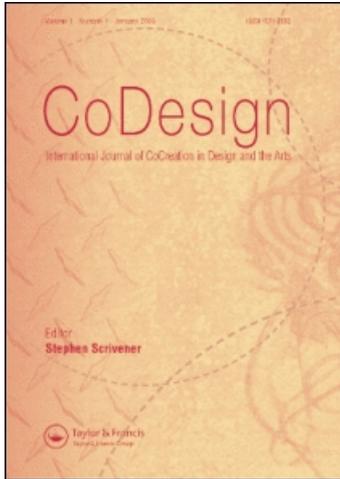
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### The quality of conversations in participatory innovation

Jacob Buur<sup>a</sup>; Henry Larsen<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> SPIRE Research Centre, Mads Clausen Institute, University of Southern Denmark, Sonderborg, Denmark

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## The quality of conversations in participatory innovation

Jacob Buur\* and Henry Larsen

*SPIRE Research Centre, Mads Clausen Institute, University of Southern Denmark, Sonderborg, Denmark*

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In co-design there seems to be a widespread understanding that innovation is a planned, goal-oriented activity that can be propelled forward through well-facilitated events in which company employees collaborate with external parties (users in particular) and the conversations aim at consensus about new product and service ideas. Conflict belonged to the ‘old days’ when participatory design played a part in the struggle between workers and management. Based on the theory of complex responsive processes of relating, we suggest a new way of understanding innovation as the *emergence of new meaning* in – often conflictual – conversations. We argue that the meeting of participants with different stakes is crucial precisely because crossing intentions can create new insight and movement of thought and action. We use improvised theatre to investigate what happens in industrial (and other) organisations that embark on participatory activities, and the barriers that prevent them. By analysing improvised scenes and the way the audience reacts, we characterise the *quality of conversations* that seems to allow new meaning to emerge and thus stimulates innovation. We suggest that we need to develop new formats of collaboration for large, complex contingents of stakeholders, where conflicting intentions are encouraged.

**Keywords:** participatory design; complexity; responsive process; conflict

### 1. Introduction

In organisational development it is often argued that a particular kind of conversation – a ‘real dialogue’ – is necessary for development to happen, and that such a dialogue can happen through a process of co-sensing where people listen to each other’s perspectives. It takes a certain attitude to become constructive together, agree to suspend judgement, be honest and try to build on each other’s ideas. Sanoff argues that ‘real’ consensus comes about as a result of comfortably agreed-to outcomes achieved through real dialogue, where differences are creatively explored. Through shared discovery, where people listen to each other and identify points of agreement and disagreement, a process of co-sensing is achieved: ‘designing a clear, well managed collaborative process can lead to agreement where all participants are likely to receive wide community support during implementation’ (Sanoff 2008).

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\*Corresponding author. Email: buur@mci.sdu.dk

Behind this thinking lies the ideal that innovation is born in consensus – or at least in a controlled environment, where intentions that diverge from this common aim need to be suppressed. From working with user involvement in industry and with organisational change in general, we experience that people have different intentions, frequently subversively expressed and very often conflictual towards each other, and that this is an unavoidable part of human interaction. We will take the argument even further and claim that intentions that are crossing each other, or even conflicting, are essential to innovation. It then becomes crucial to reflect upon the *quality of conversations* in which these conflicts are dealt with.

With this article, we will understand innovation as arising from such ‘crossing intentions’ among the people involved. Our ability to support innovation in organisations lies in our ability to recognise the quality of conversations between, for instance, designers and users, or developers and anyone else with a stake in the innovative outcome, and to find a means of urging conversations towards this quality.

In particular, we focus on *participatory innovation* (Buur and Matthews 2008), an approach that seeks to combine participatory design and design anthropology with a business orientation. From a company viewpoint, involving users is likely to generate knowledge that inspires company employees and may also generate novel business opportunities, but how user input is to gain a profound influence on company decisions remains a major challenge. We aim to understand the dynamics in which user perspectives do or do not come into play in the processes of innovation within the company.

### ***1.1. Consensus and conflict in participatory design***

In the early days of participatory design, conflict was seen as an inevitable companion of the power struggle between workers and management. Researchers collaborated with trade unions to develop strategies for workers to articulate their needs and obtain influence on their tools and work conditions, thereby expanding democracy. ‘Participatory Design is not defined by the type of work supported, nor by the technologies developed, but instead by a commitment to worker participation in design and an effort to rebalance the power relations between users and technical experts and between workers and managers’ (Kensing and Blomberg 1998). In this conception, conflict is seen as a driver in the development between the two parties, and as the workers are the weaker party, their voice (represented by their organisations) must be amplified. Managers were frequently asked not to participate in workshops because their presence might make employees reluctant to express their views (Bødker 1996). Early participatory projects took up conflicts between management and labour as a matter of principle, contrasting these to the ‘prevailing harmony’ perspective (Gregory 2003).

In the historical materialist tradition, conflicts are seen as structural, but also as driving forces of change (Engeström 1999); and in participatory design, the meeting of different parties creates conflict that can open new possibilities (Bødker 1991). Kyng recognises that the design process as such is ‘a political one that includes conflicts at almost every step of the way’ (Kyng 1998). This tradition offers a coherent understanding of emergence of novel meaning, novel structure, and novel products, namely in the structural conflict between the involved parties.

Over time, the way of talking about participatory design has changed. For years, a heated discussion was ongoing between those researchers who argued that the adversarial relation between managers and workers is unavoidable (the collective resources approach) and those who stressed the need for cooperation between managers and workers (the socio-technical approach) (Kensing and Blomberg 1998). With participatory design becoming a mainstream ‘method’, the importance of the power balance between workers and management has been downplayed in exchange for an all-encompassing involvement of any kind of user. In the broader, industrial approach of user-centred design, the idea of power relations and conflict as drivers of novelty seems to have disappeared as participatory design methods are employed to establish collaboration between developers and the *potential* users of the manufacturer’s products or services. ‘Users’ in this sense are not organised in unions, and there is no structural (employment) relation between manufacturers and users. There has been a shift towards seeing consensus as an ideal. Participatory designers tend to understand themselves not as part of a conflict, but instead as neutral facilitators of a process where different perspectives should meet each other harmoniously.

Although the majority of participatory design methods tend to encourage equal sharing of perspectives and building of consensus, there are exceptions. Mogensen’s concept of *provotypes*, for instance, suggests mock-ups used to provoke conflicting ways of thinking about practice (Mogensen 1994). Even more pronounced is the critical design work of Dunne (2000) and Redström (2006), where specially designed artefacts help to pinpoint the conflicting dilemmas in the way people organise their lives. The concept of *ethnographic provocation* is based on the observation of resistance in companies against user perspectives that are in conflict with the prevailing understanding not just of ‘use’ and ‘users’, but of company identity (Buur and Sitorus 2007).

To understand the role of crossing intentions in innovation, we will need to reconsider the concept of ‘innovation’ as a goal-oriented effort. We want to introduce an understanding of innovation that differs from the original participatory design concept, but yet as consistent in the causality. We see innovation as the *emergence of novelty* that comes about in local interactions between people with different intentions. Innovation, then, becomes the emergence of new meaning (Fonseca 2002).

### 1.2. *Complex responsive processes of relating*

In their effort to fundamentally understand the emergence of novelty, Stacey *et al.* (2000) point out a dilemma in mainstream organisational thinking: several different notions of teleology (or causality) are at play at the same time. Scientific management is based on a natural law teleology (change is caused by natural laws), but systems thinking is based on a formative teleology (like the acorn that becomes an oak). In both cases, the manager’s choice is understood according to a rationalist teleology (change is a consequence of human choice). It is taken for granted that new ideas are born in the mind of individuals (the managers) and then communicated into an organisation that works after a different causality. This understanding does not allow for free will on the part of anyone other than the manager, and ‘participation’ means to participate in maintaining the organisation.

With their theory of *complex responsive processes of relating*, Stacey *et al.* (2000) argue for a teleology that is transformative: novelty is understood to emerge in human interaction. Drawing on the work of the American pragmatists, especially George Herbert Mead (1934), and of the process sociologist Norbert Elias (1991), they see human identity as essentially social. As humans we are conscious and self-conscious, which enables us to cooperate and reach consensus while at the same time conflicting and competing with each other in our processes of relating. Stacey understands consciousness as arising in the communicative interaction between human bodies. In our vocal gestures to another, we evoke our own bodily responses. In our acting we take the attitude, the tendency to act, of the other. It follows that consciousness, knowing and mind are social processes where meaning emerges in the social act of gesturing and responding.

Furthermore, gesturing cannot be seen independently from responding (Stacey 2001, 2007b). The local interactions among humans are processes of relating in which we continuously respond to each other. We meet each other with different intentions, which create a complexity that none of us can foresee. This is a radically different position on communication than the often taken-for-granted sender/receiver model in which communication is a tool for transferring what is already thought (Weaver and Shannon 1963). Therefore we need to improvise in ways that, over time, change our own intentions. At the same time, novelty is created in the interplay with other's intentions. In these processes of relating, people do have different influence; power relations are in play.

The life of an organisation is seen as the sum of ongoing concrete relating among people, at the same time paradoxically conflictual and consensual in its nature. In these processes certain themes of conversation emerge and others disappear. Some people become excluded and some become included. To explain this, Stacey and Griffin use the phrase 'the politics of ordinary and everyday life' (Stacey *et al.* 2000).

As in the original participatory design tradition, conflictual intentions are seen as a key driver in the emergence of novelty. However, conflict is part of every ordinary conversation. In the perspective of complex responsive processes, innovation is the negotiation of meaning between people with different intentions, as processes of relating in which people conflict and collaborate at the same time.

The theory of complex processes of relating strongly rejects the understanding that humans 'participate' in systems. Stacey pinpoints that thinking in any kind of system inevitably establishes the idea that it is possible to stand outside: 'No one can step outside of their interaction with others' (Stacey and Griffin 2005). This also has implications for the researchers, who inevitably participate, whatever role they think they take. What can be done is to reflect on the basis of one's own participation. Working from the outset with this thinking inevitably also means that we as researchers reflect upon our own participation.

### 1.3. *Social worlds and arenas theory*

Anselm Strauss developed the theory of 'social worlds' and 'arenas' as a way of explaining social interaction in complex organisations (Strauss 1978; Clarke 1991). The theory sprang out of the Chicago symbolic interactionist school of sociology, of which Strauss was one of the founders. He refers back to George Herbert Mead, and consequently right from the start there are strong links to the theory of complex responsive processes.

By ‘social worlds’, Strauss and Clarke refer to how people organise their social life in groups that share commitments to one primary activity – for instance, being a hospital doctor. Rather than focusing on individuals, Strauss showed how such groups share history, ideology, and resources without regard to geographic boundaries or formal memberships of organisations. Meaning is created within people’s social worlds. ‘Arena’ is Strauss’ term for spaces where people from different social worlds are brought together to focus on a given issue. An arena includes all collective actors that are committed to acting within it, so to say, where the different social worlds meet. ‘Social worlds/arenas theory focuses on how people organise themselves and addresses how they do this on the face of others trying to organise them’ (Clarke 1991). For researchers, ‘the units of analysis then are the collective commitments and actions taken by the participants’ (Clarke 1991). The focus is on the impact of the structuration in itself: ‘Focusing on the arenas *per se* as a situation leads the analyst explicitly to specify the salient structure and processual conditions that frame and pervade the arena’ (Clarke 1991). ‘Social worlds’ is a powerful concept for describing the intentions that people from different positions bring into the conversation in the arena, and why they may be at cross purposes from the outset. However, the approach we take in this paper is different, in that we want to focus on the *emergence*: what happens in the relations that emerge during conversational interactions, once participants are challenged to readjust their positions?

We will explore how new meanings emerge in conversations between participants of different social worlds, namely those involved in a company that attempts to adopt a participatory innovation practice. In people’s daily patterns of relating, there are some patterns that are more likely to lead to innovation – the emergence of new meanings – than others. Many of us will intuitively recognise those moments when they happen. Our research aims to uncover how we may understand such a *quality of conversations* in a company. Only if we can observe and describe it will we be able to coherently support it.

## 2. Improvisational theatre as research method

In our work, we use improvisational theatre for inquiring into the social interactions between stakeholders in a participatory process. Before experimenting in actual company settings, we establish imaginary situations, but take care to ensure that they closely resemble industrial practice. We then study how alternative acts may change people’s relating, and how novelty emerges in the process.

To utilise theatre in participatory design is not new: theatre methods have been used by designers to experience use, and to invent and evaluate new systems in use. Burns *et al.* (1994) acted out situations in a hairdressing salon in order to understand the applicability of new technologies (a mirror with head-up display). They termed the activity ‘informance’ to indicate the potential mix of information and performance. Laurel (1991) showed how theatre as a metaphor can help conceive computer interfaces in novel ways. Some of the important concepts we use to explain participatory design activities stem from theatre: ‘staging’ and ‘props’ (Binder 1999; Bødker 2000). Macaulay *et al.* (2006) provide an excellent overview of methods and research directions in the young field of performance in interaction design.

However, the use of theatre in our setting is different. We are interested in understanding what happens within the organisations (industrial and other) that

embark on participatory innovation activities, and in particular in understanding the barriers that hinder such activities. We do not prototype the use of new products; rather, we use theatre to investigate the collaborative processes of creating such products. Our improvisational theatre has its origin in *forum theatre* (Boal [1979] 2000). Forum theatre was developed by Boal in 1970s Brazil to encourage people to break free of suppression – indeed, it was known as the ‘theatre of the oppressed’. In forum theatre, a situation is enacted to a point of tension or irresolution, and the audience is involved in the next moves, either by telling the actors what to do or by trying out their own intentions on stage. Forum theatre has found its use in organisational change (Jagiello 1998; Meisiek 2006; Nissley *et al.* 2004) also, but the critique has been expressed that when managers pay the actors, forum theatre can no longer be considered ‘theatre of the oppressed’ (Clark and Mangham 2004). There are striking similarities between this discussion and the participatory design debates about the ‘collective resources approach’ versus the ‘socio-technical approach’. We focus on what is emerging from the differences *between* the participants, rather than any attempts to liberate the participants from an outside oppressor.

Over a period of a year, we have developed a theatre piece – or rather, a set of scenes that allow us to explore some of the most crucial moments in introducing and carrying through participatory activities in an organisation. Short dialogues between professional actors on stage encourage the audience to discuss what happens and how change might be introduced. The actors can re-enact new versions, and members of the audience can come on stage and improvise new actions or roles. New conversations emerge in the mutually improvised relating of people with different intentions. Working with theatre improvisation is paradoxically fictitious and real at the same time, because the actor’s fictitious work is constantly met by a real response from the audience – real in the sense that people react based on their own experiences (Larsen 2005).

We ensure that the scenes mirror an actual industry practice in three ways: (1) the scenes are built on the authors’ many years of experience from, respectively, participatory design in manufacturing industry and organisational development in both private and public organisations, and they are updated with input from recent participatory innovation projects; (2) the professional actors themselves have extensive experience from theatre events in private and public organisations; and (3) the audience includes industrialists, who are asked to rate how realistically the scenes mirror their own experiences.

The empirical data for this paper stem from two theatre events in Denmark. The first was spread over three afternoons of a week-long PhD summer school. The goal of this summer school was to present various research angles on the organisation of participatory innovation. The theatre scenes served to unfold these theories in a semi-practical case. Some of the 30 participants had industry or consultancy job experience; others had engaged in collaborative projects with industry. The second playing ran over a full day with a mixed audience of 70 designers from industry as well as from the public sector and university researchers. This was a partner forum for our research centre that aimed to open a discussion of the practical implementation of participatory innovation. All the participants brought experience from co-design activities of various kinds. As both audiences had non-Danish speakers, acting and discussions were conducted in English. We documented both the scenes and the audience discussions with three synchronised video cameras. We then transcribed and analysed the footage to locate particular dialogue that expands

our understanding of both what innovation is (how can we recognise emergence of novelty?) and which interactions seem to bring about innovation (which patterns of conversation foster novelty in this context?). In the following, we will discuss the themes that the analysis revealed.

### 3. The case of Coins Inc.

The play is constructed around the imaginary company Coins Inc., a manufacturer of coins and modern payment systems. The new CEO presents his vision to introduce participatory innovation to rejuvenate the company. He also sets the goal for Coins Inc. to complete a 6-month pre-study solicited by the tax authorities: the development of a new, digital payment system for ‘unregulated markets’, i.e. flea markets and other informal businesses that still largely use coins – and pay little tax! We chose this imaginary context for a number of reasons: the ‘user’ setting is complex, with many stakeholders and ‘users’ who are not immediately happy about the product, yet the flea-market context is one that most people can relate to on a personal level. We wanted to make certain that the ‘product’ in question is a physical IT product, well away from the office machinery experience of most participants, yet entirely realistic. To enhance the realism, we even produced a set of design proposals and product mock-ups that entered the play in one of the later scenes (Figure 1).

The opening scene provides glimpses of how the business operates – and how employees in various departments react to the CEO’s speech. This scene is scripted and played by the professional actors. We ask the audience to discuss which interests (social worlds) are at play. To get the new project rolling, the CEO suggests inviting all the relevant stakeholders to meet and discuss the digital payment system. But who are the users? Who should participate? We invite the audience to identify potential stakeholders: the stallholders and shoppers, the consumer association, the tax authority, various company departments, the American owner, and so on.

#### 3.1. Stakeholder workshop: crossing intentions

Coins Inc. then opens the ‘stakeholder workshop’, a role play with some 10–12 different positions filled by the actors and members of the audience who have had a



Figure 1. Three design concepts of a handheld digital payment terminal for flea markets, developed as props for the theatre act.

few minutes to prepare for their role. For instance, how would a representative from the stallholder association react to such a proposal? What arguments would he or she bring forward? The CEO bids welcome, sketches out the innovation challenge, and asks the guests for opinions. The actual scene was fully improvised and went on for about 20 min. At the first playing, the entire audience was part of the ‘workshop’, while at the second event 11 ‘representatives’ played the meeting on stage in front of the rest of the audience (Figure 2).

### 3.1.1. Perspectives, plans and emerging themes

In their opening lines the stakeholders state their position, and say what people would expect them to: the ‘tax authority’ finds diplomatic ways of formulating the proposal as a positive opportunity; the ‘stallholder association’ expresses hesitation about the overall idea, afraid that the new system will destroy the flea-market business; the ‘company CEO’ is forthcoming: ‘What is it that you want from this mini-terminal that we will build?’ The ‘marketing manager’ thinks in terms of USPs (unique selling points): ‘We can make your life easier’. The ‘shop steward’ is concerned about job security for the manufacturing employees.

For a while, participants establish their positions in relation to one another; they say what they have planned to say. An extreme example is the ‘chemical supplier’, who at some point finds an opportunity – without relating to the ongoing theme – to present his company’s new green delivery system: ‘When we were invited, we thought we were here to make business’. It seems that roles are created as much by perceived expectations of the other players as by what each participant brings along. In arenas, people tend to act as representatives of their social world – ‘personal interests are at stake and may be predominant in a given situation’ (Clarke 1991). Although the play is entirely improvised, the participants clearly draw on personal experience: the ‘shop steward’ has been in union negotiations in a former job, the ‘CEO’ has run courses with company managers, and so on. However, although well prepared, the participants cannot stick to their original plans as the meeting develops. The



Figure 2. How might the consumer association react? Members of the audience and actors improvise the roles of various stakeholders to see if they might take an interest in the planned innovation.

‘stallholder association’, for instance (at the first theatre event), consisting of the chairman and two members, becomes embroiled in internal debate when one of the members openly disagrees with the chairman about entering into collaboration about the new system. She maintains that her association should boycott the work.

At the outset of the meeting, the ‘stallholder chairman’ (incidentally, played by one of the authors) had no intention of bringing an internal conflict out into the open. He assumed that the association would present a united front at the meeting, but this member now undermines his position by taking an opposing point of view in public. For the ‘stallholder chairman’, this provided a strong experience of how his planned intentions were challenged in the local interactions; of course, this incident weakens his voice. What influence this will have on the continued interactions cannot be said at this point, but for the company the conflict provides new insight into the different perspectives among the stallholders, an insight that can become helpful in the process of creating the mini-terminal.

In this way, every participant has their own intentions – formed by their local relations and the interdependencies also outside the meeting, interdependencies that constrain the positions but also enable movement. We will use the term *crossing intentions* to describe such a situation. With ‘intention’ we refer to Mead’s (1934) ‘effort to evoke certain responses in other actors’. We use ‘crossing’ in the double sense that different intentions can sometimes surface in ways that are seemingly unrelated, and at other times may come into open conflict.

As the participants start to challenge each other, the positions start to move. For instance, the ‘shop steward’ puts pressure on the management of the company:

*Shop steward:* We have serious concerns about [how this new technology will influence] the situation of the workers, Mr. Stryker, you should have an idea about this?

*CEO:* Today, we are mainly here to listen.

*Shop steward:* Does this mean that you are risking the destiny of this company without having a concept?

*CEO assistant:* We do have a concept; we did our homework.

*Shop steward:* Then it would be nice to have an idea of the concept, instead of sitting around talking. I would like to have a concept that ensures the future of my people.

After some discussion the ‘stallholder association’ steps in:

*Stallholder chairman:* I was curious about this – do you have a concept already?

It appears that the CEO and his assistant feel challenged by the union representative (‘Have you called a meeting without having a plan?’) to respond that they do in fact have a concept: that they have ‘done their homework’. This brings the stallholder chairman to wonder: ‘then why are we here, if you have decided already?’ So the dispute with the shop steward, which was clearly unintended from the CEO’s point of view, gave rise to a question among other participants: Why are we here? We see the emergence of a novel theme in the interplay of different intentions crossing each other, and we see how this organises the next theme for the conversation. Although the theme of ‘the plan’ was never intended by the CEO, it leads to an important new theme, however uncomfortable: to discuss the fundamental question of ‘why are we here?’

In this conversation, we also sense an underlying theme: although the act is completely improvised, in the sense that people are responding to what is just said,

the conversation seems to be co-organised by a shared fantasy – that there ‘must be a plan’, an intention that governs what is going on. As humans, we not only take the attitude of a particularised other, but also have a capacity for generalising. In our action, we tend to adopt the attitude of what Mead calls the ‘generalised other’ (1934). We create fantasies about, and are concerned by, what a group or a society may think about us. This is an often unconscious but powerful form of social control. Communication is a complex, social process of self-formation in which meaning and society-wide patterns emerge. From our experience, the notion of a ‘plan’ very often structures conversation among people in organisations. However, even if someone had a plan, the crossing of different intentions means that what happens will never be the exact result of any particular plan. The point is that novel themes emerge out of crossing intentions, if the participants allow this to happen.

We see indications of a *quality of conversations* here that may lead to innovation and change. (1) The fact that crossing intentions surface (and are accepted as such) is a quality in itself. It is uncomfortable, when it happens, and it contradicts a preconception that change only happens in consensus. (2) That new themes emerge (and are allowed to emerge) in the interaction between crossing intentions is another quality. Some may feel anxious about the direction the conversation is taking, but anxiety and change are closely interlinked.

### 3.1.2. *Concepts that resonate*

At some point, the ‘shopper’ is called upon to give her view (Stallholder chairman: ‘Who will pay for this? Are the consumers ready to pay extra?’) and she responds with an emotional talk about the delights of going to flea markets, ending with the conclusion:

*Shopper:* Please don’t touch the magic of the flea markets.

This statement, said at this moment, constitutes a move in the conversation. It is taken up by others and so begins to influence the ensuing conversation, and even the following sets. There are several possible explanations for this: the term ‘magic’ seems to strike a chord with people’s own experiences of flea markets, and it is a strong metaphor. In this particular situation, it becomes a lively and influential input, emerging from the particular patterning of the conversation, where the focus has so far been on conflict in the stallholder’s organisation, followed by the conflict between the shop steward and the CEO.

The concept of flea-market ‘magic’ seems so influential that there is a slight turmoil in the second playing (with some of the same actors and some overlap in audience), when the ‘shopper’ there chooses to take a very different stand:

*Shopper:* I have a feeling I am cheated by the vendors. What I would like is set prices and a receipt. Not too much hassle, we want to be able to use our [credit] card.

*Designer:* [But] what is the most exciting for you in a flea market? Can you describe your emotions?

*Shopper:* We were actually talking about the spitting in hands stuff [...] but we don’t want to pay overprices. It’s a balance between economics and irrational feelings.

The voice of this user draws a response from the ‘market organiser representative’, who states that, quite frankly, in his experience, this view is not representative of the

‘ordinary’ shopper. A conflict arises: can we believe this user, when the earlier one said something more in line with our own experience? An expectation among some participants, partly built on the strong experience from the first session, influences their reactions, making it somewhat difficult for a user to express another voice. Here, we see a pattern that probably happens very often: we demand that others meet our expectations of them.

Seen as *quality of conversations*: (3) the emergence of concepts that resonate with the participants’ own experience of the world is a quality that may drive innovation. Such concepts are often metaphors or other sharp and concrete expressions, but we observe that they are likely to ‘work’ only because of the improvised timing. They are easy recognisable by the spontaneous responses they elicit when they appear; and once said, they will influence the conversations that follow – they will ‘keep echoing’, to use another metaphor.

### 3.1.3. *Allowing oneself to be moved*

An interesting opening emerges at the second theatre event, midway into the play:

*Retired tax official*: We have tried this before, it will not work.

*Tax minister*: These vendors *have* to pay tax.

This exchange triggers a new idea from the market organiser representative:

*Market organiser representative*: If this is going to be implemented, *we* can take over the administration, so that the authorities do not need to – and so this can be a new business for us.

The conversation enables the market organiser to imagine a new role and express a new business perspective. Obviously, this is also important for Coins Inc. to know in their ongoing work. The processes of relating involve responding to each other in recognisable and yet surprising ways – that is, with spontaneity. Spontaneity can be observed as liveliness: one finds oneself in spontaneous activity when one becomes unsure of the response the other will make to one’s gesture. Daring to be spontaneous is essentially risky because it challenges power relations, which themselves are maintained only by continuously responding to each other in ways that are mutually expected (Larsen 2005).

Another *quality of conversations*: (4) the spontaneity that allows participants to imagine new roles for themselves or others. Allowing oneself to be moved by others, even in unpredictable directions, and in the process seeing that others change too. To be part of this will usually be felt unsafe, because the negotiated roles between people are challenged.

### 3.1.4. *The urge to control participation*

Before we move on to the next scene, let us pick up some of the audience comments in response to the stakeholder workshop.

*Audience*: It is wrong to arrange a meeting like that – we should not bring such different perspectives together.

This is a remarkably strong normative statement. At both first and second playings, this view was expressed with much emotion and not disputed. This is the

consensus-oriented position: consensus is a precondition for change. Perhaps the view also expresses uneasiness with the role of being the one who should organise such multi-stakeholder activities in ‘real’ life?

*Audience:* People are not so honest in real life.

Playing a role challenges some to take a more extreme standpoint than usual. However, we have argued how the crossing of intentions brings forth themes that no one would have thought of, much less intended. Bringing together a larger number of different perspectives – social worlds – than anyone can overview and control creates new conversations. We would like to emphasise that we do not assume that all of what happens in the emergence of the crossing intentions is necessarily ‘good’. In the interplay of different intentions, what emerges can be highly destructive; indeed, it is more the rule than the exception that the processes of relating are destructive while at the same time bringing up new possibilities (Stacey 2001).

*Audience:* We see locked positions where people hardly listen, but only use each other’s point of view in their own argumentation.

This is obviously the case, but at the same time the interplay also leads to a move in the position. So, paradoxically, we see locked positions that at the same time have a potential to move. This is in line with complexity theory, which encourages us to accept such paradoxes – that positions can change and at the same time stay the same (Stacey 2007a).

### 3.2. *Project start-up: innovative conflicts*

After the large stakeholder workshop, Coins Inc. management decides to go forward with the pre-study, and three employees from engineering, sales and design are appointed to organise a project to complete the task within 6 months. This scene is the project start-up meeting (Figure 3). We see the project team struggling with the CEO’s wish to introduce participatory innovation to ensure a product with user appeal. The team members discuss the perspectives they heard at the stakeholder workshop, and the engineer suggests the reuse of a piece of hardware from an earlier project. The designer contests this and suggests they study ‘real’ users first. This leads to a discussion about which methods the team can employ: ethnographic studies, lead-user investigations, user workshops?

This scene was written based on what was said at the stakeholder meeting in the first theatre playing – and also based on our own experience with industrial organisations. We wanted to expose typical constraints in industry – namely, that development projects assemble many legitimate stakes in the team; that the composition of the team is a management decision based on practical constraints, it is seldom the individual choice of the employees; and that designers are not awarded a special status, but need to fight for their views just like anyone else. We invite the audience to discuss what happened in the meeting between the engineer, the designer and the sales employee:

*Audience:* This is a turf war between three different competencies. They don’t really get closer to each other; they talk from each of their positions. [...] They are fighting about whose perspective should win.



Figure 3. The engineer already has a proposal for technology. But shouldn't we study users first? Actors play a scripted team start-up meeting between an engineer (left), a designer (centre), and a marketing person (right).

*Audience:* They should be more accommodating altogether. Just to recognise the fact that they are a team.

*Audience:* The designer is the only person in that constellation who is trying to build bridges, and the others show a real hard exclusive unit thinking. [...] This is so innovation-unfriendly and innovation-destroying, as there is no integration, and no 'we' feeling there.

Behind this, we sense an assumption among the audience that if only the team members on stage could be more accommodating – if they were able to listen to each other's perspectives, if they had a stronger sense of being a team – then they would be innovative! However, the team members belong to different social worlds, and have different intentions when joining the team, as well as different perspectives of what it means to create a good product. Furthermore, they each have competencies and intentions that are important for a good product to emerge. So the question is, then, how does such a team spirit emerge? Or – to put it differently – how can the meeting of the three conflictual views change, from just repeating an unfruitful pattern of conversations into allowing new and yet-unknown ideas to emerge?

### 3.2.1. *The dream of a shared goal before action*

Several in the audience point out that the team does not seem to have a shared goal.

*Audience:* What I can see is that everybody is going from their own perspective on the same level as well, because they don't really have a consensus on what the goal is. If this is the core team, then where is the project leader, who can say this is the way we are going? Is it the tax office that's important? Is it the shop owner? Or is it the customer? It doesn't really matter which one you pick, as long as you have somebody who sets the direction we are going in.

The participants do not see any of the three actors taking the role of project leader – that is, someone who can represent a goal given from 'above', and who can prioritise between conflicting user interests: those of the tax office and those of the stall owners. That a 'shared goal' may be a socially constructed entity, and that 'goals' are highly

problematic in a project aiming at innovation, does not enter the discussion at this point.

Another member of the audience makes this recommendation to the designer on stage regarding how to relate to the engineer, then gets the support of an engineer in the audience.

*Audience:* You need to transform it into a sort of a technical challenge. Maybe tell him: I want you to make a virtual shake and spit in the hand thing!

*Audience:* As an engineer I would feel a bit lost here. What's my part in that? Just give me the specifications, and then I'll go out and do it.

The assumption seems to be that it is possible to turn a complex change in user practice into a clear-cut development goal. There are several suggestions in the audience that the team ought to discuss the overall goal of the project before they start planning what to do.

*Audience:* The goals set for the output need to be reconsidered.

*Audience:* I think they should have a discussion about what the goal is here: is it to sell something in the short term, or, to think in the long term, can this product really work in practice?

Challenged to help the team, the last speaker accepts to try to initiate such a discussion by playing the part of a consultant invited in by the team leader. She does a mind-map exercise at the whiteboard. When the team falls back into the discussion about which technology to go with, she tries to maintain focus on the goal-setting:

*Consultant:* Sorry to interrupt, but I think we should stick to these goals ...

Behind this discussion we recognise a particular view of organisations: that organisations are *systems*. A system is defined by the purpose it is designed to fulfil. In this understanding, the team, being an organisation in itself, must have a goal; or, only if the team members know where to go will they actually be a team. Stacey (2007a) observes that as a consequence of this systems view, one must ascribe top management with the ability to step outside the system to define a goal that then can serve as a common goal for the system. Stacey claims that this belief in a shared goal that links the organisation together is a fantasy, and that likewise it is a fantasy that anyone can step outside the system for a moment and act as if they were free of the interdependencies that they have in their relations with others. In the most prevalent versions of systems thinking, 'participation' means to join a shared attempt to fulfil the goal of the system. In Stacey's interpretation of complex responsive processes, 'participation' means no more than to join in the ongoing conversation in the local interaction. It is in the ongoing conversations that new meaning emerges, which becomes (sufficiently) shared among enough people to create a difference.

We do not contest that discussing goals is a beneficial activity, but observe that this discussion cannot be resolved before the project begins, or by management; and it must be an ongoing conversation, in which, paradoxically, both team goals and individual goals (probably conflicting) develop simultaneously. To the extent that 'goals' are seen as 'specifications' – that is, they define what a good product should be – the notion that specifications are results of continuous negotiations was strongly asserted by Bucciarelli (1994).

In terms of *quality of conversations*, we suggest that (5) the ongoing discussion and readjustment of goals strengthens the conversation towards innovative outcomes. Too often, this only takes place outside the formal settings, in what we may call ‘shadow conversations’.

### 3.2.2. *The facilitator as participant*

With an audience full of people, each of whom has experience with involving users in various formats, the participants call for a facilitator to smooth out the harsh arguments on stage.

*Audience:* It should have been the designer, she is the process facilitator. The designer should have taken the role of changing the stakes.

After the scene in which one member of the audience acts as facilitator (Figure 4), the audience reacts in general positively.

*Audience:* They weren’t talking to each other directly – rather, they had a mediator there, who made sure everyone got represented, and then tried to organise what they were saying. They weren’t convincing each other directly, but going via someone else. And that can be helpful.

Reflecting on her own experience in the facilitator role, however, the audience member also recognises the dilemma of the ‘neutral’ facilitator:

*Facilitator:* 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 ideal of facilitation expressed here is in line with Schein’s concept of ‘process consultancy’: the consultant takes care of the process and does not interfere with the content (Schein 1998). According to Stacey, this inevitably means a doubling of process, because while the consultant takes responsibility for what they consider to



Figure 4. Let’s write your individual goals on the whiteboard. Two members of the audience (left) try to help the team on stage (actors, right) in a role as process facilitators.

be the appropriate process, at the same time there will be another process that they are inevitably involved with and cannot escape or stand outside of. In her critique of Schein, Shaw (2002) suggests the metaphor of *improvising ensembles* as a better way of seeing collaboration between people – a perspective that coincides with Keith Johnstone's (1981) improvisational theatre. In Shaw's view, the consultant must be seen as a participant in line with others. However, as the facilitator participates in the ongoing conversation, this can also be enabling because it can bring new perspectives. To what degree this can happen will depend on the quality of the relation that can be established in the present moment. The facilitator's ability to be reflexive about their own contribution is important (Larsen 2005).

Based on this, we may add a sixth issue of the *quality of conversations*, namely that (6) facilitation is part of the participation, and cannot be seen as outside of what is going on.

#### 4. Summary

How does the Coins Inc. play continue? We have worked with two further scenes: one is an improvised flea-market field study in which all the participants are either stallholders, shoppers, or user researchers. The purpose is to explore how user research may enter the company, and to discuss who does the user research and how. This is followed by a semi-scripted 'handover meeting' in which an external company partner (a consultant, a university researcher) comes back after some off-site design work to present a series of design concepts (Figure 1). The purpose is to discuss barriers in transferring new ideas from outside into the organisation.

Our work with improvised theatre has served to explore the emerging quality of conversation, how we deal with conflicting intentions, and when conversations obtain a quality that makes movement of positions possible. Based on the complex responsive processes of relating of Stacey *et al.* (2000), we have seen how new meaning and new ideas emerge in the interaction of crossing intentions. Although the theatre activity works as a laboratory, we are able to make relevant observations about the dynamics of how users and other stakeholders may interact with company employees, because we have written the scenes based on many years of experience with such situations, and because we ask the audience to use their own experience to make adjustments until the plays seem realistic to them.

The *qualities of conversations* that we find through the careful analysis of video recordings are listed below. Conversations may lead to innovation when:

- (1) crossing intentions are allowed to surface;
- (2) new themes emerge in the interactions between crossing intentions;
- (3) new, vigorous concepts emerge that resonate with participants' own experiences;
- (4) there is a spontaneity that allows participants to imagine new roles;
- (5) there is an ongoing discussion and readjustment of goals; and
- (6) facilitation is exercised within the circle of participation, rather than from 'outside'.

Understanding innovation as a result of the negotiation of crossing intentions brings forward a new view on participatory innovation. An attempt to reduce complexity or control conflicts between perspectives may impede innovation. Thus there is a need

for developing new formats of collaboration for large, complex contingents of stakeholders who improvise their interactions. This would expand the well-known participatory design workshop format. Also, the understanding of facilitation as maintaining control and seeking consensus needs to be re-examined with the notion that conflict and crossing intentions can be drivers of innovation. As a facilitator, one cannot maintain a role as neutral consultant outside the process. The facilitator enters into constant relating to the other actors.

To us, participation means simply to take part in an ongoing conversation with others, not to subscribe to a higher organisational goal. Shared goals may emerge through ongoing relating, but people are capable of collaborating nevertheless. The quality of conversation becomes crucial if we aim to support innovation. We believe that this work can help to deepen our understanding of the role of user involvement in innovation processes in companies. Influenced by the thinking of Stacey *et al.* (2000), we have studied ‘the politics of everyday life’ in innovation processes and suggested characteristics of a quality of conversations that, we believe, encourages innovation. This is helpful if we seek to understand why the voice of the user sometimes disappears in the continued conversation in the organisation.

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