

Writing PD: Accounting for Socially-Engaged Research

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ABSTRACT

As participants in participatory process, PD academics report on the practices and outcomes of their work and thereby shape what is known of individual projects and the wider field of participatory design. At present, there is a dominant form for this reporting, led by academic publishing models. Yet, the politics of describing others has received little discussion. Our field brings diverging sensibilities to co-design, conducting experiments and asking what participation means in different contexts. How do we match this ingenuity in designing with ingenuity of reporting? Should designers, researchers and other participants all be writing up participatory work, using more novel and tailored approaches? Should we write more open and playful collaborative texts? Within some academic discourse, considerable value is placed on reflexivity, positionality, inclusivity and auto-ethnography as part of reflecting. Yet, PD spends no time in discussing its written outputs. Drawing on the results of a PDC'16 workshop, I encourage us to challenge this silence and discuss "Writing PD".

CCS CONCEPTS

D.2.10 Design, Methodologies, Human Factors.

KEYWORDS

Reflexivity; writing; positionality; auto-ethnography; narrative; story-telling; expression; infrastructuring; participatory; account.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The field of participatory design has long been an innovative space. From games to theatre, we have approached people to share in thinking differently and devised intriguing ways to do so. As a field, we helped shape user-centred design [27] as well as bring politics squarely into accounts of designing (e.g. [4]). Our work

has brought social science and humanities sensibilities to bear on design practice. We have asked what participation means in many different contexts, from youth [24] to developing regions [13]. There are projects about futuring [16][19] and infrastructuring [6].

Similarly, there are experiments in writing up our practices. We know the inspirational prologue to *Making Futures* [16], where Watts, Ehn and Suchman [43] engage in an epistolary form of academic dialogue associated with 19th century novels. Pieces between anthropology and participatory design [41][42], self-published design research [15][22][26] and community-facing publications [29][34][36] all play with form; [29] uses a poem and recipes to report collaborative research to partners; [30] addresses how to share credit across groups in community media contexts.

Yet, the writing of our practice is mostly seen as a complement to research: reporting for others, at finish, to gain visibility for the outcomes and share academic knowledge. It seems we rarely attend to the writing of an account. This ignores the constructive labour of account-making, the politics of representing others and the interpretive and situated nature of all account-giving. It plays to a false perception that an overview is intrinsically possible [20] and a scientific take on what it means to write and research.

In choosing our account, we make our practice as we write. So, it is important to think about the relation of style and content, new models of authorship, and the merits and frustrations that accompany the straitjacket of academic publishing. While we may not be able to – or wish to – change the way that reporting happens in the mainstream of academic encounter (where a powerful norm exists), we can interrogate its impact on practice and use creative spaces provided by more experimental forms of written (co-)construction to plumb our accounts for new insights and to legitimate new practices of feeling, telling and accounting for. We can look at approaches to writing *with*, as well as writing *about*, to mirror the redistribution of power found in choosing to design *with* instead of *for*. Scrutinizing our writing practices is part of examining the politics of PD and a corrective to assuming there is a legitimate authorial voice.

In anthropology, the book "Writing Culture" [11] sought to investigate the relationship between aspects of anthropological practice, fields of enquiry and how to capture these nuances in ethnography (literally 'writing culture'). This paper builds on a 2016 workshop [31] to ask some of the same questions for our practice of working together to make new things, tools, relations, processes - and the texts that explain these.

2 WRITING OUR PRACTICE

'Writing our experiences using novel approaches is not merely fun. It creates meaning, allows us to make new connections, and

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offers a form of expression that may better capture some elusive aspects of our practice.’ [31]. In following different forms, we learn more about what we are doing and are capable of doing. Chen et al comment: ‘Allowing ourselves to consider ‘paper-making’ as part of the practices surrounding knowledge production would also expand an understanding of other research practices such as reflexivity.’ [10]. Why is this so? There are four complementary aspects to reporting that are regularly overlooked in writing up PD projects.

2.1 The Constructive Labour of Account-Giving

When we write, we bring something into being: we make a piece of text. This is more apparent when we construct fiction [45], but true when we give a critical account of another’s work or follow a specified scientific reporting format. In choosing what to include and which words to use to describe phenomena deemed of note; in trusting the work of writing to one author or a group (but always a particular group, through choice or happenstance), the tone and content of a piece emerge. The account that is written is hewn away from all the accounts that will never be heard. It is part of the learning for authors about what their work may mean.

Frequently, such choices are made in consultation with the style of the hoped-for publication venue. For instance, PD as a field is led by empirical reporting and publications that support it. Our account-making reflects a particular conception of knowledge based in *doing*. Sometimes, nonetheless, an essay format is used and ideas, not methods, are expected to travel (such as here). Thus, there are genres of writing. These are deliberate choices that go unmarked when adhered to, whereas forms outside peer group conventions often need to be accounted for. An example of an academic paper that makes a point of deviating stylistically - and in what it understands as knowing - addresses design and mindfulness, stressing the challenge of reporting on this topic: ‘*We use form to play with form and formlessness as an essential ingredient in complementing the linearity and narrow formatting of traditional papers ... We seek to extend what is possible with a paper submission to play with the configuration of these elements as a sensorial fulcrum in communicating our routes towards mindfulness.*’ [1]. As well as critiquing form, the paper devotes much of the text to images and a reported conversation. At peer review, it was lucky to find a metareviewer supporting its approach – that of trying to create an experience for readers, as well as inform them [1].

2.2 The Interpretive, Situated Nature of Accounts

It follows that an account is only ever one possible account, prepared for that context [3]. With publishing requirements for novelty, it is problematic to offer many accounts of similar work, though it would be interesting to see thoughtful retellings. We know our design work is highly situated in time, culture and geography [40]. Our writing also reflects our preoccupations.

2.3 The Politics of Representing Others

Participatory design is, of essence, never conducted alone. A sole author may describe the outcomes of a design process, but the

reflection is necessarily on work that was conducted as a group. (Here, for instance, I am indebted to co-organizers at a workshop, all of whom read this in draft, yet I chose to give only my perspective.) When not everyone involved in that project is included in the writing and editing team, we may ask about the other voices as a matter of political representation.

The academic team usually has the most to gain by seeing the work in print. This is an understandable set of relations, but one that embeds a power structure because the authors are often telling a story involving others [39]; these others may have no say in what is said. Often, this is accepted as a matter of course as part of participation. Different arrangements exist: co-authors and editors may include non-academic participants; sometimes, what is written is checked with all participants or special authority is negotiated as part of the project. For instance, when I write about a particular project I am obliged to state that the agreed position on talking about the work requires me to say that what follows are my thoughts and do not reflect on those of others involved in this project. That is the ethical position taken in the project on how we report it. This is not what I state about other projects, though it is usually true that the thoughts are mine alone when I write by myself (as here). Making this caveat about the content in my descriptions of that work helps acknowledge the power relations we were working to understand and address and acts to level them a little, though it would be stronger if I could then point the reader to other versions or offer a contact for a different account.

The politics of colonialism are relevant here: something with which the nearby discipline of anthropology has come to terms in its transition from colonists’ tool to critical social science (e.g. [11]). Postcolonial theory has already debunked the idea that one can speak for others [23]. PD, as a field, has not addressed its tendency to speak *for* rather than *with* (though there are papers that deal with this colonizing tendency in individual cases, e.g. [12] [33], and good literature in other fields, e.g. [39]). PD, despite its roots as a politically emancipative design practice, is not functioning as a critical academic discipline in this respect.

2.4 Academic Straitjackets and Notions of Rigour

What determines what we say? Historically, publishing costs gave rise to page and word limits, but digital publication changed that. Now, fair competition and the need to manage reviewer loading argues for a stop on the length of authors’ formal publications. These policies force a choice about what to include. In setting priorities, transferability of knowledge to others in the research community has become a tenet of rigour in reporting and informs authors as to which material does not need to be included. This differs by field. For instance, reporting of discourse analysis shows rigour by citing the full passage used as source material and conducting an open analysis of its sense. Consequently, these papers tend to be very long. PD, with its focus on sharing method, not on the methodology of analysis, tends towards other qualitative styles of reporting, such as descriptive case studies.

The ACM publishing model emerges from yet another tradition: a history of treating technology design as scientific [9] conducting experiments into cognitive processing and producing

replicable quantitative empirical studies. It is set up to deliver “findings”. Affect, local politics and other social factors of design work are not “findings” in this framing, so it follows that such details may be left out of accounts as irrelevant.

Chen says there ‘are knowledges that don’t get copied over into paper form, such as ... the necessary and personal, situated struggles that make us intellectual agents in the academic network’ [10]. Yet academic life impacts how rigour is understood. Pressures of work require papers organized with a succinct summary at outset and conclusion: “why read this paper” and “what we found out” support readers to skim. Reviewers are trained by experience to help these formats reach their audience (in addition to editorial comment on structure, argument, tone and writing). This structure has an impact beyond form. Anecdotally, design conferences are starting to notice a creeping conformity towards ACM style and tone, as well as format (pers comm.).

What kinds of style are appropriate for PD? Unlike scientific reports of replicable phenomena, PD operates in highly contingent circumstances. As noted, our reports very often constitute case studies. Have we reflected on how case studies work to offer understanding? Without reference to the contingencies that social elements bring [28], the write-up may offer few clues about the conditions in which the study team was active, making it not only impossible to replicate (a given, as no one can step into the same river twice), but without transferable knowledge.

Just as disciplines have differing understanding of rigour in practice, it may be rigour in reporting needs to change for PD. Action Research [35] and Design [18] principles do not resemble those of quantitative methods. We accept that PD reaches from co-design of new health systems [7], to user participation in making better consumer devices, to community action [14]. Part of our rigour, then, may be a full discussion of how we understand the dynamics of participation in the project we are reporting on.

3 DIFFERENT APPROACHES

At a workshop at PDC’16 on “Writing PD” [31], seven organizers and several more participants heard different ways of writing up socially-engaged research and were silenced by the beauty of the read work. The organizers had picked advance material submitted to the workshop where an unorthodox style had been used. Hearing the work we had chosen took far longer than intended as we listened to the pieces, then quizzed the authors at length. What was not factored into the plan was the degree of accomplishment, but it became clear that this elegance was what had enabled such unorthodox work to compete for publication with more traditional styles and themes.

We also talked about the conditions of making the work. Two aspects stood out as the authors told of writing their material. First, though the seniority of attendees varied, this writing had been conducted as part of doctoral studies and no one had, so far, been able to maintain their creative approach to academic writing into their subsequent career. (A different story emerged on self-published community and public-facing material, eg [8]). Second, all had struggled to get their accounts accepted, facing both revisions and rejections before finding a form of expression that

worked so powerfully that it was difficult to dismiss and, with this, finding a champion on a review panel prepared to support it.

In other words, writing against the tide not only requires confidence with language, but also a degree of persistence, if it is to surface in academic publications within our field.

3.1 Giving Voice

When Laura Poplow and Melisa Huque shared their individual work at the 2016 workshop, they discovered their use of roles to speak of their experience (*idiot* and *ghost* respectively) coincided sufficiently to coauthor a paper that spoke of both for Nordes [38]. In this piece, they challenge orthodoxies of engagement, telling of their practice through Other being(s). Huque says the ghost allows her to consider ‘silence as choice for communication, the role of things in mediating unspoken dialogues, and in the opening of playful negotiations’ [38]. Poplow describes how, ‘[w]hile the cycling-activist tried to Other the designers as a way of remaining powerful in the articulation of the issue, playing with the role of the idiot helped the designers to re-open the co-articulation of issues’ [38]. Not only do they talk of their use of a defamiliarising device through invoking these roles, they make a space for others to conceive of similar [38]: ‘We therefore used the typographic tool of intentional blank space _____ to open places for inventive intervention for these Others to appear in between the lines – and for you to have a space to perhaps reflect on similar experiences.’

As noted, postcolonial theory is relevant. ‘Instead of aiming at including marginalized voices, which is a common topos in participatory design and that assumes a kind of colonizing move to decide who is marginalized and how to include ‘them’– we would like to shift our view to the notion of *engaging with Others*.’ they say [38], including space rather than giving voice.

3.2 Auto-Ethnography and Positionality

Another reading at the workshop came from Kaiton Williams on *quantified self*: an account of his changing perspective towards his body. Unusually for PD, his work is framed as ‘auto-ethnography’ [44]. This allows him to dismiss disciplinary expectations of generalizability to speak on the personal impact of technology use even while doing research on others’ experience of self-tracking technologies. ‘I don’t assume [...] that my experiences will be the same as others. I hope to read other accounts that will be markedly different. This has been an unabashedly person-centred attempt to present a perspective on these systems and communities,’ he says, quoting the French author Perec as an influence in his discussion of the quotidian and the intimate [44].

Williams never settles on a characterization of relations, seeing them as evolving in tension between his roles as technology critic, researcher and highly implicated user. We learn that skepticism and devotion can co-exist simultaneously in different parts of the psyche. By writing like this, he is able to raise irreconcilable aspects of practice without compromising or becoming reductive.

Although the authorial voice is strong and ever present, and the personal is political in his narrative, Williams never articulates power structures or specifically sites himself as a subject within them. He speaks of *felt* life and presents the complexity of socio-

technical engagement from within the system(s) of use. This is one form of self-reflection, contrasting with accounts where authors define themselves using standpoint theory [21] or another form of positionality, situating their viewpoint as an intersection of their gender, race, culture, class and economic status, as well as reflecting their personal perspective. PD practitioners tend not to include much biography, self-reflection or accounting of personal experience, with some exceptions [37]. We can ask what would it do to our accounts if we wrote ourselves into them more fully?

3.3 Collaborative Writing

As part of the workshop, I spoke on a self-published co-designed writing project for which all core participants (academics and community-based researcher-activists) were involved in writing and editing. As well as challenging ourselves to manage this, in our book *Everyday Disruptions* [17], we draw attention to the process of working together. We include texts showing our editing choices and the relations that evolved in the making of the work: *'Themes came and went, drifted sideways, re-focused and then took other directions. If thoughts and discussions began to revolve around notions of reverent actions, playfulness, trust, gentle disruption and enchantment, this was without the expectation of imposing an artificial consensus.'* (Jos [17]) and: *'Our encounters produced a distinctive form of research. It is difficult to talk about it without referring to the collective and I am not the collective. I do not speak for others' experience. Every use of 'we' is thus potentially problematic ... I can only point to the plurality of the outcome and suggest that it wasn't accidental.'* (Ann [17]).

As noted, authors often write collaboratively in PD to report on completed work, raising many challenges of motivation, voice and synthesis. In this project, in contrast, the collaborative goal became the making of a series of juxtaposed texts (where voices are not synthesized or put in dialogue) to make a book based on accounts of social change [1]. The group creating and editing the book found the need to rethink authoring, editing and crediting practices on the fly. I spoke at the workshop about how long it took to progress in a way that allowed a group of eight people to reinvent accepted practices and participate in all decisions on tone, content, structure and style for the book. Easing things somewhat, the book's graphic design went to a specialist, but this too had to be approved by all and involved many types of change. The result, while a labour of love, points to a way of uniting without diminishing plural voices and their points of view, which has now been reused in a more formal context [32].

4 TEXT AS INFRASTRUCTURE: DISCUSSION

PD is open to the idea of socio-material infrastructures (e.g. [25] and [6]). Chen et al describe the process of publishing written work in a way that makes clear its relation to infrastructuring: the text becomes a resource but also a definition; a platform for future practices of knowing as well as a discussion: *'Once archived, the paper becomes a referential object for members in the discipline to engage with A paper cannot be replaced or un-researched: its authors' post-rationalised narratives become fixed. However, it is also 'up-for-grabs', by other members of the discipline, who*

are able to interpret and respond to the paper with their own research.' [10]. The text transitions from the status of *being written* – a fluid negotiation of the meaning of partnerships, events and outcomes, which may involve several authors and many rewritings – to *being published and archived* – when relations between concepts are fixed and format, genre and discipline have come into play. In doing so, the text changes from an intimate learning space for the authors to a performance for others. This begs us to ask how we make the best of the accounting process for the team and the reader. It is apparent that when the authors learn through experiments so does the wider academic community, but not necessarily all participants. Open access is not enough. As researchers motivated by, and versed in, participation, we could promote infrastructuring that goes beyond our current writing and publication practices, to look both at how learning happens in the creative process itself and how we respond to the politics of it.

4 CONCLUSION

This piece began by acknowledging several edge-cases: self-published and published texts that have resisted orthodoxies of PD reporting. These texts report appropriately for their publics, but recognize that the style and tone of academic writing is neither demanded nor necessarily welcome in all contexts. Some of this work also challenges how knowledge is made. It is noted that much of this work sits between PD, STS and anthropology. If we look at review processes, we can see this role as self-reinforcing: the disciplinary influences being both cause and effect.

This paper is not written to offer an alternative or a particular way forward; its goal is not to create a new orthodoxy. In wrapping up, I draw attention to the value of playful encounters with Other entities, auto-ethnography and juxtaposition of plural voices, not just as forms to emulate, but as examples where researchers have challenged themselves with form in order to understand as well as express their material better. There are many reasons why junior colleagues might feel unsafe to share their spaces of experimentation, so it is particularly noteworthy that some early career researchers have felt able to be playful. What we see is not just skillful reporting but access to new ways of thinking through engagement with literary process.

To end on a reflexive note, this paper has used a traditional format to point to examples of people breaking out of accepted modes and finding value in experimentation. For those who like to use text as a medium of creative practice, I suggest you 'do as I say, and not as I do'. In a year when the politics of publishing are starkly demonstrated by the need of the PDC conference and its authors to adhere to an awkward new ACM template, I think the idea of playful insurrection has never been more timely.

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