3 Co-Realization: Toward a Principled Synthesis of Ethnomethodology and Participatory Design

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Abstract

This paper calls for a respecification of IT systems design and development practice as co-realization. Co-realization is an orientation to technology production that develops out of a principled synthesis of ethnomethodology and participatory design. It moves the locus of design and development activities into workplace settings where technologies will be used. Through examples drawn from case studies of IT projects, we show how co-realization, with its stress on design-in-use and the longitudinal involvement by IT professionals in the “lived work” of users, helps to create uniquely adequate, accountable solutions to the problems of IT-organizational integration.

Keywords: ethnomethodology; participatory design; design-in-use; co-realization

3.1 Introduction

As IT systems become steadily more organizationally embedded, the challenge faced by IT designers and developers is to understand the social relations of the workplace and their implications for systems design. The search for methodological innovations and enhancements that might deliver this understanding has yielded some promising results. Of these, ethnomethodology and participatory design seem to us to have been the most valuable. Ethnomethodologically informed ethnographic studies of work practices (e.g., Heath and Luff 2000) have been used to inform IT systems design about the social character of work (e.g., Button 2000). Participatory design (e.g., Greenbaum and Kyng 1991), in contrast, has been instrumental in promoting the value of user expertise for design as well as the cause of user involvement and control in IT projects.
Despite these important contributions, it seems to us that ethnomethodology—at least as it has been applied to IT systems design—and participatory design talk past each other, with the result that their full potential has not been realized. Both have been used, in effect, as “patches” for more fundamental problems in IT design and development practice. In this paper, we call for a principled synthesis of ethnomethodology and participatory design, a radical respecification of IT systems design and development practice as intersubjectively constituted, lived experience. The essence of our proposal is that IT system design and development practices should be organized as a co-realization by users and IT professionals. A fundamental aim of co-realization is to break down boundaries both within technology production and between technology production and use (Suchman 1999).

We begin with an overview of what we mean by co-realization and put this in the context of other, related approaches to IT systems design and development before setting out what we mean by co-realization in more depth. We then use case studies of real-world projects to illustrate our experiences to date of practicing co-realization. Finally, we discuss the implications of our experiences for co-realization in practice, including its relevance to, and suitability for, large-scale IT projects.

3.2 Co-Realization: An Overview

Our starting point for thinking about IT systems design and development practice is that the “design problem” is not so much concerned with the creation of new technical artifacts as it is with their effective configuration and integration with existing work practices and the subsequent need for them to co-evolve. The key issue for a respecified IT design and development practice is therefore not only “design,” but also “use.”

Despite a welcome turn to the social, the fact remains that current in IT systems design and development practices stop short of grappling with the realities of work practices: user requirements that can only be identified in the context of—and through—use are being lost. Yet the work setting is a key arena for innovation and the all-important “domestication” of technologies. We note, for example, how through processes such as “learning by doing” and “learning by interacting,” users are able to experiment, share, and appropriate the innovations of others, mobilizing their collective

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^1 As we note below, the categories “IT professional” and “user” seem to us to be problematic—we use them here as placeholders before embarking upon a respecification of role and involvement.