

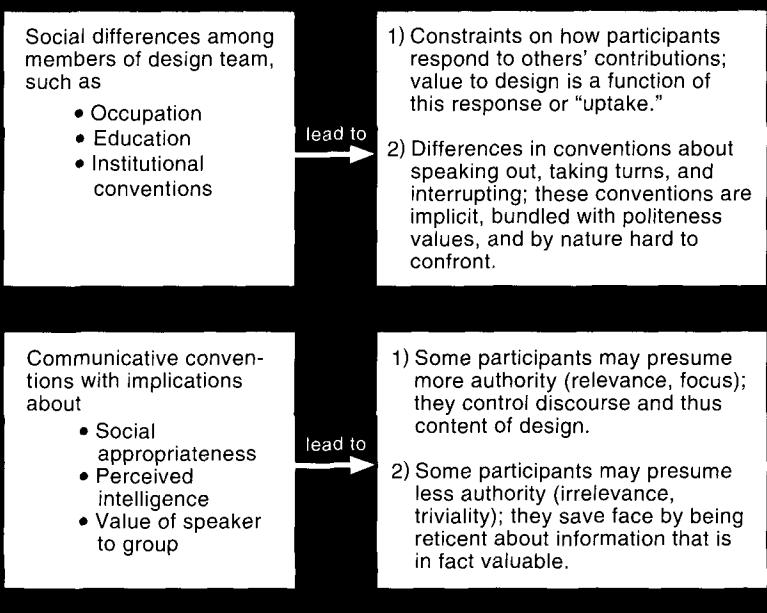
Participatory Conversation in PD

David Novick
OREGON GRADUATE INSTITUTE
BEAVERTON, ORE.

Eleanor Wynn
TRANSPARENT PRACTICES
WEST LINN, ORE.

Premises

- PD is a relatively novel social situation involving people of varying professional, organizational and educational backgrounds.
- The primary medium of PD is conversation.
- The participants' backgrounds set up distinct values, assumptions, and ways of handling a conversation.
- The process is participatory only if there is equality in the conversation. The background differences can work subtly against this, despite good intentions.
- Mismatched background assumptions show up in the language and structure of the design conversation and can be uncovered and analyzed.



Example

While believing in PD as a technique, many software engineers may assume that technical knowledge takes priority over less structured domain knowledge of other participants on a team. They tend to focus on accuracy in descriptions of the proposed system, and on information that supports their conception of proper system scope.

The system design can suffer because:

- 1) The user-participants assume that their knowledge of actual rather than ideal organizational processes is "anecdotal" and irrelevant. To avoid seeming foolish to the technical people, they do not challenge formal statements of work

or ask for technical clarification. They aren't clear about possibilities and limitations of the system-to-be.

- 2) The software engineers feel satisfied that, as they develop a logically connected procedure description and the users agree with their version of it, they have enough information to proceed. Avoidable problems then surface after implementation.

Possible Miscommunication Cues

- Disclaimers and pre-apologies
- Use of same terms in different contexts or different terms for the same thing
- Responses that don't match a prior statement

- Letting obvious misunderstandings slide
- Consistently different turn-lengths among classes of participants
- Attempted turns or topics that never succeed
- Patterns of interruption or utterance completion
- Not laughing at the same jokes

Problems

- Participatory equality may not come naturally; conversational mechanics must support it.
- These conversational mechanics are not part of the professional training of most system designers; instead, they are skilled at talking within a deep professional context of fine distinctions about computing.

Consequence

The diversity that makes PD uniquely productive also makes it a special challenge to the communicative resources of participants. The point of PD is to bring together people from different backgrounds. These backgrounds are dense social, cognitive and conversational domains.

Hypothesis

There are research tools to examine and guide this complex intersection of domains. Mismatches among design team members' assumptions and conventions can be recovered from natural-language logic and conversational structure.

Possible Remedies:

1. Analyze naturally-occurring discourse in design teams; identify common features of successful and unsuccessful conversations.
2. Increase awareness among designers about conversational differences.
3. Identify systematic misconceptions associated with participants' backgrounds.
4. Identify characteristics of software tools that reveal differing assumptions.

References

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