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The Craft of Participation in a Changing World: How AI Practitioners Can Help in 'Holding Space' for Generative Conversations

Edited by

Arne Gillert, Kris Snick and Pieterjan van Wijngaarden

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Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company**

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Arne Gillert experimented with his first large-scale participation process when he was seventeen. He has worked in different fields and sectors, only to become more convinced of the power of involving people to shape solutions based on their connected interests. Today, he is a partner at Kessels & Smit, The Learning Company, based in Utrecht and Hamburg.
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The Craft of Participation in a Changing World

How AI Practitioners Can Help in 'Holding Space' for Generative Conversations

Participation has become more widespread. It can be used to improve policy decisions, but it can also be used to avoid them.

People increasingly demand that their voices be heard. How can we activate, share and develop this wide base of knowledge and experience?

Though I see a lot of individual intelligence in organisations, it often leads to collective stupidity.

Professor Stephan Jansen

In our modern world, participation has become increasingly widespread. Some politicians use it to truly improve policy decisions – others find it a good way to avoid controversial decisions. Civil society has come a long way in experimenting with a variety of forms. Commercial enterprises and other organisations are discovering that just deciding from the top might not be the best way to achieve ultimate wisdom. Citizens increasingly demand that their voices be heard. The awareness that we need all the available knowledge to deal with the issues we currently face has permeated our world. But how to activate and access this knowledge, how to make it explicit, share it and develop

We look at designing environments in which constructive participation can be learned and can take place as a profession.



The national rail network in the Netherlands looks for a participative company strategy, page 15

it further in a constructive manner is not yet easy –that is a question that fascinates us.

In this issue of *AI Practitioner* we look at participation as a profession. Or rather: we look at designing environments in which constructive participation can be learned and can take place as a profession. One that we, as AI practitioners, carry out on a daily basis and with which we add value in the societies and organisations in which we work. We explore the concept of participation from three overarching, simple questions: why, what works, and what are questions for the future?

In his article “I participate, therefore I am”, Pieterjan van Wijngaarden starts with an exploration of the concept of participation. What is it? What developments in our environment make participatory processes important? Following the definition found in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, he explores the idea of participation as “the fact that you take part or become involved in something”.

Arne Gillert dives into a history of participation and interviews Professors Robert Goodspeed and Jutta Rump on the longer-term historical perspective. How has participation been shaped throughout time? Why? What is it an answer to?

In their article “Developing a Company Strategy in a Participative Way at the Netherlands Railways”, Marijke Boessenkool, Martine van Es, Remko van Oijen and Pieterjan van Wijngaarden explain their approach of designing a constructive space for participation in a big company.

Kris Snick interviews Belgian theatre directors Inne Goris and Pieter Delfosse who create participatory theatre with children. Their method of challenging, empowering and appreciating shows the ways in which participation can be learned and how co-creating a play brings with it an experience for children about how participation leads to shared ownership of the result.



Participative, appreciative work with wellbeing in the Arctic, page 35.

Roopa Nandi describes, in her article on dealing with the taboo subject of menstrual hygiene in India, how choosing a participatory approach leads to more buy-in – and success.

Tony Ghaye takes us far north to the Arctic where he works with indigenous peoples in the mental wellness and wellbeing “space”. He takes us on a little journey through his work: participatory in design, appreciative in practice and positive in flavour.



Luc Verheijen

Luc Verheijen is a partner at Kessels & Smit, the Learning Company. He is a Taos Institute Associate and co-publisher of *AI Practitioner*. His co-authored book *Appreciative Inquiry as a Daily Leadership Practice* will be published by Taos Institute Publishers in September 2019.

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Epilogue: From Ideation Participation to Distribution of Responsibility

Four main views of the concept of participation have emerged from the articles in this issue of *AI Practitioner*.

Participation:

As a need

As a profession

As a learning process

As a co-deciding process.

The main theme in this edition of *AI Practitioner* has been participation. The range of articles has delivered theoretical and practical perspectives on participation in organisations, companies and in society. To close, we invited AI practitioner Luc Verheijen to reflect with two guest editors on the contributions of this issue. We have concluded that we have seen four different views of the concept of participation in the articles:

1. Participation as a need
2. Participation as a profession
3. Participation as a learning process
4. Participation as a co-deciding process

Participation as a need



One way of framing the need for participative processes lies in describing the world we live in as a “VUCA” world. Another way, probably pointing to the same idea from another perspective, is complexity theory. “There is an increasing realisation that the old singular recipes no longer work. The dominant model of planning and control often provides more an illusion of functionality than it actually does.” (Stacey, 2010). Stacey suggests that questions featuring a relatively low level of uncertainty and a high degree of likely consensus about what needs to happen benefit from a directive approach that follow procedures and clear targets. But questions or issues that are highly unpredictable and likely to invite large differences in opinions or images require a very different approach. That approach can be, for instance, participative: inviting multiple voices into the room, working with a question to discover rather than an answer to implement, using the process to discover possibilities with each other along the way. In the article about the children’s theatre play, the interviewees argue for a space of “not knowing”. And instead of being anxious, they playfully use that space so new possibilities can emerge.

Participation as a profession



Participation has become a profession. That means that designing a generative environment for participation is a craft. Being generative is a quality that has several effects, and it is the combination of these effects that should be the ambition of any participatory process. In the first place it is about generating new ideas and new possibilities. Secondly – and this is what makes it different from, for instance, brainstorming – it is about people who, by developing new ideas together, feel an increased energy to turn those ideas into something concrete together. So generativity is both generating images about the future and generating an increased sense and awareness of wanting to take one step further in that direction with each other. To be able to move into that action space, a relational space needs to be developed first. The role of a facilitator is crucial in those kinds of participatory processes. For us, this is described in many of the articles in the ability to create a conducive environment to share multiple perspectives and viewpoints, to dare to challenge ourselves and the people we work with by asking ‘weird’ questions to which we don’t know the answers, or the ability to be aware of the language and moral compass we use in conversations. It is all about holding space.

Participation as a learning process



In Arne Gillert's article, "Participation is a logical consequence", Professor Jutta Rump argues that participation by many increases the spread of knowledge in the system. It leaves us with some questions about the meaning of the verb "to spread"; we would like to underline that it is "developing knowledge" that is at the core of every participative process that has been set up to learn about dealing with complex issues. If we connect that with the theory and practices of Appreciative Inquiry, it also demonstrates how the "Inquiry" part is the crucial element of using AI as a perspective to look at participation. If inquiry is the activity that we place in the centre of our processes of participation, everyone's voice adds a story and something to learn from as we gradually move together in discovering what gives life, in dreaming a best possible future, and in designing pathways to move collectively in the direction of that future. In the article about the Dutch railways, the authors call this "first-hand knowledge". It is knowledge that is discovered and created among the people involved in the participative process because they are invited into a collective appreciative inquiry.

The challenge for participation for the future definitely lies in the fact that this facilitation of complex processes in an increasingly complex world is a continuous learning process, for the facilitators, for people wanting to introduce participatory processes and for the people participating. It demands from us an ability to put ourselves into question when confronted with a different point of view, to sometimes accept the discomfort of a topic that has shame associated with it, or to dare to seek confrontation with a different point of view while still being curious and still listening. And, in a world that wants proof, asks for neutrality and clear measures, it is often not easy to gain appreciation and understanding for the vagueness and open character of such a learning process. We could maybe learn from and find inspiration in the way artists explore, co-create and design without a clear objective or goal but with a personal mission, a belief and qualitative result at the end of the process.

Participation as a co-deciding process



Several articles pinpoint the importance of power and power distribution in relation to the theme of participation. That is such an important topic. In witnessing and being part of participative processes, we know that it is often seen as "ideation participation". People are invited into a participative process around a question or topic and have the space to brainstorm, and to provide ideas. A facilitator will support in converging main ideas and proposals. It is often with these recommendations that participation ends. They are offered

as “good advice” to people who have the power to decide whether or not to implement these ideas, decision makers who often not have taken part in the participative process: policy makers, directors, politicians. The question is how to move from ideation participation to distribution of responsibility, to a participative process where people are involved not only to give advice, but also to take part in the decision process and in the execution of ideas they were enthusiastic about. If we look, for instance, to an Appreciative Inquiry summit as one form of designing a participative process, it is clear how co-deciding is a central principle and goal: everyone has a voice in decision making. This is also illustrated in the article about the study in India. Participation is set up to reach a particular goal: people move towards executing ideas with – and this is a crucial element – ownership of respective tasks.

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- Learning is at the heart of what they do: they aim to create and facilitate powerful learning processes.
- The professionals from Kessels & Smit want to be good company to each other and to people they work with: they believe the best solutions are developed in partnerships.
- They strive to be a learning organisation, constantly renewing their work processes, structures and approaches. The company is their “laboratory”, where they experiment and find answers for learning and development and organisational questions.

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