

# Contact Quality in Participation

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## ABSTRACT

This position paper investigates and interrogates the concept of participation through a perspective of the quality of the contact between the participants. It argues for the need for an academic-personal competence qualifying the human contact central for all participatory Design (PD) activities. It calls for a research agenda developing a contact perspective in collaboration with fields from psychology and therapy having specialized experiences in investigating open contact and authentic meeting as a bodily-related experience.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2008-2012, I<sup>1</sup> participated in making the *International Handbook of Participatory Design* [1]. Together with Toni Robertson, I co-authored the introductory chapter of the book. During the review process the reviewers asked us if we could characterize and elaborate on what we saw as the special quality of participation that constitutes the field of PD and hereby distinguish PD from other "user-oriented" fields and approaches. Our key suggestion indicating this quality, was a contact perspective inspired by, and discussed with, Olav Storm Jensen, stating that "any user needs to participate willingly as a way of working both *as themselves [...], with themselves [...], and for the task and the project [...]*" [1, p. 5, original italics]. This perspective unfolds basic aspects constituting the quality of the contact between the participants and the contact that the individual participant has with him- or herself (as a basis for the contact with others).

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<sup>1</sup> This position paper uses "I" instead of "us", as it presents the first author's perspective on PD. The paper is based on many years of collaboration between the authors, is written by Jesper Simonsen, and discussed and commented on by Olav Storm Jensen.

Design tools, techniques, project management, facilitation, ways of 'setting the stage', etc. are indisputable parts of relevant competence areas within PD. The practice of PD work, however, is concentrated around activities where the participants need to get in contact with the designer and with each other. In the past decade, I have realized that this entails a type of basic competence addressing the ability to establish and maintain a high quality of contact between the participants of any PD activity. This involves enabling a type of authentic contact between the participants, i.e. where the participants strive to meet in a way where they can be honest and work in an atmosphere of impartiality and objectivity – as opposed to an atmosphere of pretending, where for example the fear of making a mistake or losing face are driving forces.

I increasingly acknowledge this contact perspective as being a relevant, critical, and overlooked competence needed for designers and researchers practicing PD through public, commercial, or action research based PD research projects. I believe that this perspective needs to be investigated, developed, and reflected in our practice of researching, teaching, and practicing PD. A research agenda for a contact perspective should include engaging in exchange and collaboration with fields that have a history for such perspectives as their core concern.

The field that I have been inspired by, through my collaboration with Olav Storm Jensen, is humanistic, phenomenological-existential, and body-oriented psychotherapy. Olav Storm Jensen has a lifelong research and therapy experience and has founded the *Sensetik Institute* (sensetik.dk) [Danish combination of 'sense' and 'ethics', sensethic<sup>2</sup>.] 27 years ago [2-4]. The body-orientation of Sensethic has its roots in Alexander Lowen's Bioenergetics, especially the concept of grounding [5, 6]. Bioenergetics again is rooted in Wilhelm Reich's vegetotherapy [7].

In relation to this position paper, Olav's position may be summarized as arguing:

"[T]hat the primary professional skill in psychotherapy is a personal one. The practical therapeutic value of the

<sup>2</sup> The Danish name Sensetik includes the duplicate meaning of being a general term for studies based on sensations (and sense), as well as an indication of the finding that ethics, values in human relations, are based on bodily, emotional sensations.

therapist’s theoretical and technical competence is dependent on the therapist having sufficient ability to be present in the contact with the client in the therapeutically relevant way [...] Therapeutically relevant presence is seen as an absolute orientation towards the client’s true interests, with two critical dimensions – one, awareness-related, and the other, ethical – in the service of this orientation. The awareness-related dimension deals with total personal presence; the ethical dimension with human authenticity.” (Citation from the English summary in [3]).

Below, I present a contact quality perspective on participation in PD with a starting point in the traditional mutual learning perspective on participation in PD. I also outline examples from my academic course at the university that focuses on this perspective.

### A CONTACT PERSPECTIVE ON PARTICIPATION IN PD

The ‘mutual learning’ perspective is probably the most widely and best-known starting point of unfolding the concept of participation in PD. We use mutual learning as a core part of the very definition of PD in the handbook:

“Participatory Design can be defined as a process of investigating, understanding, reflecting upon, establishing, developing, and supporting mutual learning between multiple participants in collective ‘reflection-in-action’ (Schön 1983). The participants typically undertake the two principle roles of users and designers where the designers strive to learn the realities of the users’ situation while the users strive to articulate their desired aims and learn appropriate technological means to obtain them” [1, p. 2].

This definition is instrumental as a starting point to explain what participation in PD is about – see Figure 1.



**Figure 1. The two principal roles and the human relation between them (slide from the Tutorial on PD held by Toni Robertson and Jesper Simonsen at PDC’2014).**

Participation in PD has been labeled as ‘genuine’ participation in design processes [8]:

“By ‘genuine’ participation, we refer to the fundamental transcendence of the users’ role from being merely informants to being legitimate and acknowledged participants in the design process. This role is established – for example – when users are not just answering questions in an interview about their point of view or knowledge of a particular issue, but are asked to step up, take the pen in hand, stand in front of the large white-

board together with fellow colleagues and designers, and participate in drawing and sketching how the work process unfolds as seen from their perspectives” [1, p. 5].

What does this perspective of ‘genuine’ participation or ‘open contact and authentic meeting’ (lower part of Figure 1) entail? The response to this defining aspect of the quality of participation in PD is described in the handbook of PD by referencing work by Olav Storm Jensen:

“Any user needs to participate willingly as a way of working both

- *as themselves* (respecting their individual and group’s/community’s genuine interests) and
- *with themselves* (being concentrated present in order to sense how they feel about an issue, being open towards reflections on their own opinions) as well as
- *for the task and the project* (contributing to the achievement of the shared and agreed-upon goals of the design task and design project at hand) (Storm Jensen 2002)” [1, p. 5].

In the 2002 paper by Storm Jensen [4], this ideal situation is described by reference to the therapist-client relationship, and how the therapist should work ‘as themselves, with themselves, and for the client’. What does this mean in the context of participation in PD?

*As themselves* (respecting their individual and group’s/community’s genuine interests): The keyword here is *genuine*. ‘As themselves’ refers to being authentic, and maybe the easiest way to explain authenticity is by its opposite: *pretending*. Being authentic simply means not to pretend being anyone else but yourself – or being anything else but what you are; not pretending to be knowledgeable about something you do not really know; not acting friendly and accommodating if you really are angry and e.g. against an issue being proposed; not acting as if you are informed and certain if you really have doubts about an issue; etc. *Being open, honest, and truthful with the interests at stake, as related to the issue discussed.*

An example: In my current action research project at a Danish Hospital, we discussed introducing a new way of making fasting times for patients more visible, which entailed recording the time of the fasting start. This was part of a PD project designing a new information infrastructure to improve coordination between departments of patients to be operated. The aim was a change so that patients do not fast (too much) longer than the required six hours [9]. The nurses that attended the design workshop were open about doing this recording (of fasting start) for elective patients, but hesitated and were reluctant to start doing this for acute patients. They knew that if they did this, it would help the progress of the project and its aims – but this recording was actually the responsibility of the physicians. Making the physicians to do this recording would be a real challenge for the project (they knew their

physicians were reluctant to changing practice and doing more “administrative” tasks). But the nurses – on the other hand – felt that they often were pushed or squeezed into a position, where they had to “help” the physicians to get things done – where physicians used and maintained their role in that way as being located higher in the hospital hierarchy than the nurses. The nurses’ being open and honest about this issue is an example of participating *as themselves*.

*With themselves* (being ‘concentrated present’ in order to sense how they feel about an issue, being open towards reflections on their own opinions): A keyword here is *presence*, i.e. being present as opposed to being absent, for example, if you can look a participant in the eye while discussing a matter and if the participant can feel that you are concentrating on listening to what he or she says. If you are distracted, by for example recognizing that time is passing and you might have troubles in getting through the agenda for the meeting – and that starts to frustrate or stress you – this being ‘concentrated present’ might well be challenged. ‘Presence’, and ‘being present’ are key characteristics of phenomenological psychology characterized by Olav Storm Jensen:

“[I]t focus on the subjective perspective on how matters, the reality, problems, and potential solutions, etc., unfolds as seen directly from your own perspective, as seen by yourself. This, in contrast to how it appears as interpreted, understood, or described through some kind of objectifying perspective, i.e. with some form of theory about the reality put in between [as a pair of glasses] yourself and this reality. Such theories can be psychological science based [or – in relation to PD – e.g. ANT], cultural given, or just given as common sense – or it can be exclusively private, e.g. psychotic” [4, p. 120, translated from Danish].

*For the task and the project* (contributing to the achievement of the shared and agreed-upon goals of the design task and design project at hand): The point here is referring to being *as themselves* and *with themselves* for the purpose of the joint project activity of the participants, e.g. the specific and ephemeral task to be done as part of a design workshop. This involves that the aim and agenda of any given joint activity is known and accepted by all participants. It also implies respecting that different participants may contribute differently in terms of contribution area, expertise, ‘amount’ or ‘volume’ of their contribution, etc. Furthermore, it is given that no hidden agendas or other kinds of manipulations are part of the collaboration: If that is the case it may well have serious complications and can destroy any trustful relationship, that much work has been invested in establishing.

#### A UNIVERSITY COURSE EXAMPLE

I have experimented with teaching a contact quality perspective during a graduate course in PD, which has been held two times since 2013, and was presented at the

PDC’2014 workshop on Teaching PD [10]. The course is summarized below:

- Goal: Experience *presence* in personal contact – as a relevant PD competence. Engage in authentic meetings discussing an overview of 20 years of PD research.
- Form: Grounding & contact exercises. Short intro-lectures, group & plenum discussions.
- Content: Training for an academic-personal development through simple physical exercises that practice and qualify the human contact competence, human relations, and cooperation. Increasing the student’s body-awareness and consciousness through grounding exercises. Using grounding and contact exercises as tools for developing the student’s ability to establish and maintain presence in contact. Collective investigations and open discussions of the seminar’s textbook on PD. Relating the readings to student’s own PD project experiences.
- Basic reading: The PD handbook [1].



**Figure 2. Photo from grounding exercise (top) and contact exercise (bottom).**

A significant part of the course is training the students to investigate open contact and authentic meeting as a bodily-related experience. Go with the flow, or surrendering to yourself, so to speak, is an important element in this investigation. For this purpose, each course day starts with one hour of physical grounding exercises, and in the latter part of the course, these exercises are followed-up by contact exercises (Figure 2). After a grounding session, the students are asked to do a contact exercise in pairs of two (dyad). They sit on a chair facing each other and are asked to look at each other for 10 minutes in silence, with the

simple, though not necessarily unproblematic, task of “see the other, feel yourself”. After doing this for 10 minutes, they discuss this experience together for another 10 minutes and the course continues by discussing experiences from the contact exercise as related to their design process experience from earlier courses and projects.

During the discussion part of the course, attention is concentrated on how the students feel about and react on nervousness, stress, pressure, panic – and reflections are made on how to deal with it, including ‘techniques’ such as:

- 3 times down (down ‘in the body’; down ‘in tempo’; down ‘into the concrete’).
- Distinguishing between *being* (a good person) and *doing* (sometimes making mistakes).
- Taking responsibility for own mistakes (doing’s) without compromising own being (I am still a good person although I made a mistake, and I can take responsibility, and take action for doing my wrongs right).
- First-love principle (a reinterpretation of the Golden Rule principle; “love your neighbor as yourself” within Christianity): (treat (or meet) yourself with the same loving and respectful attitude as you would do with others).

The reactions on and evaluations of the course so far have been very positive and the students generally acknowledge that they meet a relevant type of competence, however a type of bodily-related competence, that is – I assume – completely unknown to the university curriculum – where the focus of all teaching is restricted to the intellect and “the head”.

#### BIOGRAPHY

**Jesper Simonsen**, Professor of Participatory Design at Roskilde University. Chair of the PDC Advisory Board. Has since 1991 conducted Participatory Design action research in collaboration with industry - focused on how information technology designers can cooperate with users and their management especially when relating to the clarification of goals, formulation of needs, and design, realization, and evaluation of coherent visions for change.

**Olav Storm Jensen**, Adjunct Professor, Roskilde University. Has since 1974 conducted research, therapy, supervision, and teaching within body-oriented psychology and psychotherapy, among others in collaboration with Alexander Lowen. Leader of the Sensethic training program since 1988 and founder of the Sensethic Institute in 1998. Has developed the *Sensethic competence*, a personal relational competence qualifying human contact. Assistant and Associate Professor of Psychology, University of Copenhagen (1969-1983). Awarded with The University of Copenhagen gold medal in 1969. Magister Artium (mag. art.) in Psychology from The University of Copenhagen (1970).

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