

Problematizing the Participatory Subject in Demands Driven Development of Public Sector

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Abstract. This paper concerns the construction of the individuals to whom public e-services are aimed, and who are expected to participate in demands driven development of public sector. The argument is that these individuals are differently positioned in relation to and have different prerequisites to participate in demands driven development processes, and that this has to be taken into account by practitioners who are working demands driven development of public sector. The aim of the paper is thus to address the need to acknowledge differences in individual users' possibilities to participate in the development of public sector through opening up and critically analyze categories indicating participants – e.g. 'users', 'citizens' or 'practitioners'. This is done through a discourse theoretical analysis of a text; the Swedish Guidelines for Demands Driven Development. The analysis of the text shows that the dominant category signifying a participatory subject is 'target group(s)', which is articulated according to four different themes. However, none of these themes articulates an unpacking of the category 'target group(s)', and the term is instead used to signify everyone as if these were alike and had the same prerequisites and possibilities to participate in demands driven development processes – in discourse theoretical terms 'target group(s)' works as an empty signifier. In this way differences between the individuals who are included in the category are hidden, and practitioners are left with no guidelines for how to deal with these.

Keywords. Participatory subject, demands driven development, public e-services, discourse analysis, empty signifier

Introduction

The concept of a participatory subject has reached an almost indisputable position in the design of information systems, and it is often claimed that the involvement of users is critical to the success of a system. Already in 1984 Ives and Olson [1] made a literature review touching upon user involvement and indicators of system success, and since then many others have followed [2–4]. As a result, a lot of effort has been invested in order to enhance the understanding of the participation of system users in information systems development processes. However, fewer texts have been devoted to address the construct of a participatory subject in itself; its different origins, translations, dimensions and implications, and the participating subject in the development of public e-services is no exception. The argument that will be put forth in the paper is that the individuals constituting participatory subjects are differently positioned in rela-

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tion to and have different prerequisites to participate in demands driven development processes, and that this has to be taken into account by the practitioners who are implementing demands driven development of public sector. The paper aims at contributing to the field of demands driven development in public sector through providing a more nuanced discussion about the imagined participatory subject and its prerequisite to participate in the development of public sector.

In public sector there is currently a movement towards more cooperation with the citizens and businesses, primarily with regards to the development of public e-services [e.g. 5,6]. The expected benefit of a closer cooperation with citizens and businesses is to make public sector more efficient and to minimize costs. Related to this is also a fear that these actors do not use the e-services enough; “the majority of EU citizens are reluctant to use them [the public e-services]” [6]. Thus, there is a fear that the expected savings will not be realized and it is supposed, that if the citizens are somehow involved in the development of these services, they will also be more inclined to use them. The importance of a user presence is repeated over and over again in different shapes: involvement, empowerment, collaboration, flexible and personalized, user satisfaction etc. [6].

In information systems and related disciplines the concept of ‘users’ is generally used as a concept covering a range of participating subjects in a variety of contexts. This suggests that situated in and related to different contexts there are a vast number of articulations or constructions of participatory subjects, in terms of for instance ‘users’, or some other term indicating participatory subjects, e.g. practitioners [7], citizens or businesses. Hence, even though a single term is used, this term might include a multitude of heterogeneous participants who are differently positioned in relation to the information system at hand. Hence we argue that categories such as ‘users’ – are ‘done’ or constructed differently in different contextual settings. The construction of users – and hence participation – is done in several different ways, for instance in how some users and not others are invited into system development projects [8,9], in how users are invited into system development projects in early development phases and thus granted more influence, or later when most of the important decisions have already been made [10,11], or in how users are grouped into more or less large and representative groups [12]. The construction of users is also done in various texts such as policy documents and guidelines in which ‘users’, ‘citizens’ or some other category indicating participants are articulated in relation to specific expectations, values or activities.

However, if we are serious with demands driven development categories which indicate heterogeneous groups of actors, such as ‘users’, practitioners, citizens and businesses needs to be opened up and expanded in order to disclose the actors that are implicitly and explicitly included in these groups. Only then can we begin to discuss which individuals who are central in a specific design process, and make sure that some individuals are not left out. Furthermore the individuals that are included in such categories are differently situated in relation to the information system at hand, and have different prerequisites and possibilities to act and participate in the development of this. These differences might be described in terms of traditional sociological stratifications such as class, gender, age, ethnicity and so forth, but they might also be discussed in the form of those who have or do not have knowledge or access to technical language [13], or have enough time depending on family situation, work, gender etcetera. This problem is related to issues of representation and the possibility to accurately represent groups of individuals [12], but also to issues of access to information technologies [14], something which is however not within the scope of this paper. It is important that

there is an awareness about these issues among the politicians and practitioners dealing with the development of public e-services, and that there are methods for taking these issues into consideration. This is foremost a question of the expectations and handling of individual citizens and their participation; the situation with the participation of businesses is somewhat different since this is done within an organizational setting.

The paper aims to address the need to acknowledge differences in individual users' possibilities to participate in the development of public sector through opening up and critically analyze categories indicating participants – e.g. 'users', 'citizens' or 'practitioners'. This will be done through a discourse analysis of a specific text, in this case the Swedish Guidelines for Demands Driven Development [15]. Our point of departure is that participation and hence 'users' or participants are constructed in a variety of contextual settings, and our choice to analyze this particular text is motivated by the fact that in Sweden this is the main document that aims to provide practitioners in public sector with practical guidelines for how to involve and cooperate with citizens and businesses in the development of public sector. Hence this particular text constitutes a central Swedish example of a text in which the construction of participatory subjects is done, but it is not considered representative of the construction of participatory subjects in more general terms.

The paper is structured as follows; first, the theoretical points of departure are presented, constituted foremost by a discussion of the various prerequisites of individuals to participate in the development of public sector, and discourse theory which will be our analytical methodology. Second, the text (The Swedish Guidelines for Demands Driven Development) is presented shortly and the methodological procedure is given account for. Third the text is analyzed and discussed and finally, overall conclusions are made and impacts for practitioners in demands driven development of public sector are put forward.

1. Theoretical Points of Departure

The paper is based on a constructivist point of departure, and written in a critical tradition, which here means a focus on making visible and problematizing that which is taken for granted, especially in the form of knowledge practices such as the creation and reproduction of knowledge, truths and hegemonic discourses, and the consequences of these for various actors [16,17]. What is taken for granted and hence what could be understood as possible alternatives is different in different contexts, but here we are interested in critically exploring the idea of a participating subject, articulated through concepts such as 'users'.

Participatory subjects may have different prerequisites to participate in demands driven development, and there are many aspects of this issue. One predicament relates to practices of defining concepts and categories and the boundaries between these, something which is central in social life. Such practices are also central in disciplines such as sociology and information systems – in sociology in terms of categorizations of gender, age and class, and in information systems for instance in terms of the categories that are built into information systems [18,19]. However, the categorization of individuals are often problematic for several reasons, for instance when categories are based on limited knowledge and prejudice, this might lead to overly simplified and general categories, categories that the included individuals do not identify with and which thus fail to accurately represent these individuals, or categories which leave out

central actors, who thus become marginalized and made invisible [12,18,20,21]. This is related to the acknowledgement and inclusion of minorities. A related problem is the fact that any category is heterogeneous and multifaceted, and thus it is hard to talk about for instance 'women' or 'immigrants' as though these categories were consistent, and the individuals included in the category were homogeneous [12,20,21]. In the context of demands driven development also other aspects of individuals' different prerequisites for practicing participation are relevant. For instance in Participatory Design and information systems more generally it has for a long time been discussed how 'users' often do not have the same technical knowledge as 'designers', and thus might find it hard to formulate demands on a system under development [13,22]. In this case it is the question of a lack of technical know-how and language which makes it hard to participate and formulate demands in a specific design situation. In terms of knowledge about the Swedish social system this might also be a problem for some individuals to know and understand which of their demands that the public sector is obliged to meet. Furthermore individuals might hold different positions in terms of demanding fulfilment of their needs.

It is important to underscore that practices of defining categories are power related practices in which some actor(s) define other actor(s) as included in or excluded from categories [e.g. 20,21]. Categories often have concrete and sometimes severe consequences for those who are categorized, for instance when a homosexual refugee is not granted refugee status, but is instead sent back to a home country in which s/he will be persecuted as a sexual deviant. Categories are constructed and emerge and become meaningful in a specific situated social order – and some categories become taken for granted as truths and are viewed as self-evident rather than as constructed. These categories are repeatedly reproduced by various actors – and hence become more stable than others – even when they are problematic for those who are included therein, for instance the category 'parents', which includes a multiplicity of differently situated and heterogeneous individuals.

One way of critically analyzing what is taken for granted is through the use of discourse analysis, in which the point of departure is that dominant or marginalized discourses play a central role in the reproduction of the existing social orders, at the same time as they constitute an arena for the change of these. There are several ways of working with the concept of discourses [e.g. 23,24], and here we have chosen to work with discourse theory [24–26]. A general definition of discourses is that "a discourse is a specific way of speaking about and understanding the world (or a part of the world)" [24]. Hence discourse can be understood as a number of rules and taken for true conditions that act as rules and procedures that in some sense control human action, in terms of what is considered as true and what is considered as correct and doable in a specific context. With this definition a discourse is always part of a specific situated context, including social practices, and cannot be reduced to textual or linguistic practices. By including social practices the perspective is broadened and includes also the relations between language manifestations and the conditions and practices which enable these manifestations. Inherent in such an approach to discourse are different relations of power.

For the kind of reading we are interested in here we find several of the central concepts in discourse theory useful [24]. In accordance with Laclau and Mouffe [25,26] a discourse is a system of meanings in a specific domain [24]. A discourse can be understood as social life, and is not translatable as language practices such as speech or writing only, but includes all systems of signification [26]. This system of meanings is not

set once and for all, but is always moving, whereby the meaning of signs – or words, concepts, categories – are shifting. In this way, social phenomena are never set or closed, but instead meaning can never be finally permanent, something which opens up for social struggles over definitions of society and identity. Outside of a specific discourse there is “the discursive field” [25: 111], which is a reservoir of meanings which signs had or has in other discourses, but which are ignored in the specific discourse in order not to create disorder [24]. Within a specific discourse there are central, or privileged, signifiers (concepts or words) around which other signifiers are ordered and from which they gain meaning, for instance “the body” is central in medical discourse, and democracy in political discourse. These privileged signifiers are called *nodal points*. Furthermore, *moments* are signifiers within each discourse which are relatively stabilized, or closed, whereas *elements* are the signifiers which are not yet defined. However, moments are never completely defined or closed; there is always some instability; “the transition from ‘element’ to ‘moment’ is never completely finished” [25: 110]. Depending on position and influence different actors have different possibilities to reproduce and change existing discourses through acts of confirmation or change of the meanings of moments and nodal points. When several meanings hand are coupled with the same signifier without taking into consideration their possible intermediate complexity and the complexity seems to disappear inside the signifier the signifier is called an *empty signifier* [26]. Laclau [26: 106] (ibid.: 106) writes that an empty signifier “signifies a totality which is literally impossible. Seen from another angle, this is a hegemonic operation ... [in which] a certain particularity transforms its own body in the representation of an incommensurable totality”. An empty signifier is a term representing an assortment of differentiated particularities, which are not united by any common feature, but which are rather united only through the act naming, and hence creating a category.

With the help of the concepts *nodal point*, and *empty signifier* we will analyze the Swedish Guidelines for demands driven development [15], with a focus on articulations of central categories signifying participatory subjects in this specific text.

2. Empirical Case and Research Methodology

The policy document which constituted the empirical material for the analysis was the Swedish Guidelines for Demands Driven Development [15], a 69 pages long document working as the primary guidelines for practitioners in Swedish public sector organizations. The guidelines are published by the Swedish delegacy for electronic government (the E-Delegacy), and written by a working committee within the E-Delegacy. The text is divided into five main chapters, plus references and research, and an attachment about methods for how to explore the demands of target groups. The sections are: 1. About the guidelines (including for instance objective, goal, delimitations, explanations of terms, about the writers), 2. What is demands driven development? (including for instance demands as part of the development process, and basic principles for demands driven development), 3. Why is there a need for demands driven development?, 4. How is it done? (including how to get started, challenges and how to handle these, and a checklist for how to handle challenges), and 5. Examples. Our analysis includes the first four chapters, and covers pages one to forty two.

With the point of departure of the aim of the paper – to address the need to acknowledge differences in individual users' possibilities to participate in the development of public sector through opening up and critically analyze categories indicating participants – our guiding questions for the analysis were:

1. *What kind of categories indicating participatory subjects emerge in the text and how are these articulated in relation to other elements?*
2. *How are these categories articulated in order to make visible differences between the individuals included in the categories, and methods for dealing with these?*

The reading and analysis of this document took place in several steps. As a first step (question 1) we made a rather generous definition of participatory subject and individually searched for instances of these in the first 42 pages of the text, and marked each instance of a possible subject. After that we went through the text together, and discussed whether to include or exclude a specific instance. When discussing our initial reading, it soon became clear that it was not at all self-evident what a participating subject could be. However, the concept 'target group(s)' emerged as the most dominant one and appeared as a privileged signifier, or a nodal point. We then made a second individual reading, searching for how the term 'target group(s)' was used in the text; if and how it was combined with other terms, and in what context it appeared. In doing this we marked the whole sentences in which the term target group(s) was used, something which resulted in themes of articulations. More specifically we searched for how 'target group(s)' was related to actions, practices and contexts. Finally (question 2) we searched for articulations of differences and nuances of the nodal point within these themes.

3. Analysis

In the analysis we will first present the analysis of the text in terms of how in the text there are articulations of a participating subject in relation to demands driven development of public sector. Second, we identify themes of articulations, and third we focus on how differences in the articulations of participatory subjects.

3.1. *Articulations of a Participatory Subject*

The actor in focus and hence privileged signifier (i.e. participatory subject) in the guidelines for demands driven development seemed to be the term 'target group(s)' (in some form or other; the target group(s), target group(s)). Our first analytical question was: *What kind of categories indicating participatory subjects emerge in the text and how are these articulated in relation to other elements?* Starting out from this we searched for how this nodal point was articulated, first by the obvious search for definitions. One of these definitions showed how in the text 'target group' was articulated as "a defined group which is interesting as recipients or dialogue part" (p. 8). It was also stated that "Public agencies, municipalities and county councils have different names for the persons, groups or organizations that they exist for or address. It can be the general public, inhabitants, citizens, users, customers, clients, other organizations, target groups and so forth" (p. 8). Second, we searched for articulations in the form of contextual themes, i.e. how this nodal point was related to other elements in the text such as

actions, practices and contexts. When analysing the sentences including the term target group(s), several themes for how the term was used could be discerned.

One theme (A) was about identifying, catching, mapping, finding out, put in focus, know about demands of the 'target group(s)'. This theme was the most common, and examples are the following quotes:

- "find out the demands of the target groups ... have knowledge about the target group ... catch, understand and in development integrate the demands of a target group" (p. 5)
- "put the target group in focus ... meet the demands that target groups' experience" (p. 7)
- "knowledge about the target group's behaviour ... the mapping of the target groups' demands" (p. 10)
- "having competence and knowledge of the target group ... remind about the target group's perspective" (p. 19)
- "catch the demands of an identified target group" (p. 22)
- "identification of target group ... reach the target group" (p. 39)

Another theme (B) concerned the cooperation with the target group(s), and here it was about involving the target group(s), being in contact with the target group(s), communicate with them and so forth:

- "involve the target group continuously ... recurring contacts with the target group ... simplify target groups' everyday lives ... meaning that the target group will be involved and become active" (p. 11)
- "let the target groups become more involved ... which demands the target group has ... the target groups are relatively passive ... the target group is active and participating" (p. 12)
- "cooperate with the target group" (p. 21)
- "involve the target group in the development" (p. 40)

A third theme (C) concerned the fulfilment of the demands of the target group, and how services might create benefit for target groups and public sector organizations. Examples are the following quotes:

- "produce services that fulfil target groups' demands" (p. 4)
- "the demands of the organization/organizations as well as the target group" (p. 17)
- "if the target group does not use the service" (p. 22)
- "which problems a specific target group has ... when the target group or the agency benefits from a service" (p. 40)

The final theme (D) concerned how to handle the target group in terms of their size and composition. This theme was the only one that in some sense touched upon the problem of how to deal with the fact that the 'target group(s)' is in no way homogeneous, and this was done through a focus on how to find representatives for the target group(s):

- "having too large target groups ... try instead to segment the target groups" (p. 16)

- “A difficult question is how to find users who are representative for a target group, and whose demands and wishes covers the demands of the entire target group” (p. 20)
- “the composition of the target group” (p. 25)

To find, to focus on, to map, to catch, and to identify are articulations that are formed around the notion that ‘target group(s)’ as a category in a self-evident way exist ‘out there’ and is possible to identify, communicate and cooperate with. These articulations indicate a belief that there are already predefined groups constituted by representative individuals that can be communicated with. Creating benefits, deliver in line with demands, and fulfil demands are also articulations circling around the idea that it is possible to interact with an existing target group. These themes seem to naturalize the idea of the ‘target group(s)’ since neither of them question the idea of an existing, or easy to ‘find’, target group. The fourth one however differ to some extent since it in some sense opens up and questions the taken for grantedness of the category, in terms of size, composition, and representativity of the included individuals.

3.2. The Target Group as an Empty Signifier

The second analytical question was: – How are these categories articulated in order to make visible and practically handle differences between the individuals included in the categories? In relation to this question the analysis makes visible that the privileged signifier ‘target group’ was rather poorly nuanced, questioned or problematized – other than very shortly in terms of size, composition, and representativity of the included individuals. Even though the privileged signifier ‘target group’ is a generalized category in which a multiplicity of different actors is included, the differences are not touched upon. There were no articulations of how to the risk that categories might be structured by biased assumptions of who to be identified. There were no articulations of how to handle the fact that individuals might not hold equal possibilities to act as participants – in terms of abilities to formulate their needs or to understand that they do have needs that the public sector are obliged to meet. There were no articulations about the possibility that the participants might hold different positions in terms of demanding fulfilment, and there were also no articulations of how to identify and include minority groups.

On the contrary, ‘target group’ was used without any efforts of deconstruction or problematizations, and the readers and users of the guidelines seemed to be expected to fully understand and grasp the concept of ‘target group(s)’ and also be able to communicate this to other practitioners. Hence it was not discussed who might be included in the category ‘target group(s)’; if these might be old, young, women, men, transsexuals, homosexuals, working class, middle class, in the midst of making a career or at home with a newborn child and with the main responsibility of home and children, born and raised in Sweden or came to Sweden from Syria only three months ago, with a university degree in electrical engineering or with a degree from junior high school and with poor knowledge in Swedish language. A broad and inclusive category such as ‘target group(s)’ might include all of these, but this is not made visible in the guidelines, and it is not discussed how such a heterogeneous category might be practically dealt with.

In discourse theoretical terms the category seemed to work as an empty signifier which included every possible participatory subject without taking into consideration their possible intermediate complexity. The complexity seems to disappear inside the

signifier and the signifier is as such labelled an empty signifier [26]. In this case the most apparent hidden complexity is that of power and its linkages to biases and different prerequisites and possibilities to participate. 'To be identified' places the participatory subject in a very passive position, the participatory subjects might hold unequal possibilities and affordances 'to be involved' and 'to express demands', and inside the articulations of 'size' of the target group are the reduced possibilities of representation for minority groups.

4. Discussion and Conclusions

We have used a discourse theoretical framework to explore how participatory subjects are articulated in a specific text (the Swedish Guidelines on Demands Driven Development). We found a privileged signifier – 'target group(s)' – and analyzed how this category was articulated in relation to other signifiers in the text. In this analysis we found several themes which were related to 'catching' and 'involving' the target group(s), and to 'goal fulfilment', and 'size-management' of the target group(s). The analysis showed that the category 'target group(s)' was used in order to deal with the multitude of heterogeneous individuals that public sector are faced with when developing public e-services with a demands driven agenda. However, concealed in the category of 'target group(s)' were several complexities; the passive position of being identified, the unequal possibilities and affordances of 'being involved' and 'expressing demands', and making invisible minority groups. Consequently the category hides several of the complexities of participation, and can in discourse theoretical terms be understood as an empty signifier. What is hidden behind the signifier of 'target group(s)' are power relations and social orders, the power to categorize and the position of being categorized, or being left out of existing categories [20]. Also made invisible is the fact that possible participants in demands driven development of public sector have different prerequisites to participate. When these heterogeneities are not touched upon they remain hidden and the possibility to analyse the complexities and also to create methods and tools for how to deal with them are lost. The use of the concept 'empty signifier' makes it possible to address this as an active black-boxing of differences in position and power relations that takes place through the use of the term 'target group(s)'. Through identifying 'target group(s)' as an empty signifier it becomes possible to open up the box and make visible and nuance their differential positions and prerequisites in relation to demands driven development practices. Doing this would greatly increase the possibilities for the practitioners to make use of the Guidelines in their work with making demands driven development happen.

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