

Popular Scientific Abstract

Ph.D. Dissertation: Play. Learn. Innovate. Grasping the Social Dynamics of Participatory Innovation.

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„Play. Learn. Innovate. – Grasping the Social Dynamics of Participatory Innovation“ the title of this thesis describes how the complex interplay of unexpected events led to some burning questions and eventually to this thesis, which could be called an innovation¹. After several years as a communication designer, a manager in retail, and as a consultant the author has been involved in several innovation projects from different perspectives. After experiencing that a major factor for success or failure of innovations always were people and how they related, he became curious to understand this better from a management perspective. When the author did not find any satisfying answers in the world of practice, he decided to return to the world of theory hoping to find answers there. However, he did not. After extensive literature studies mainly in the fields of social capital, organizations, complexity, and knowledge – but also drawing on psychology, sociology, and philosophy – no satisfying approach was found that resonated with the complex experiences in innovation practice where in the messy everyday of projects the only thing one knew for sure was that one’s role and function was interdependent with other people’s roles and functions and that uncertainty was omnipresent. While finding many interesting and enlightening studies with brilliant concepts, methods and implications in each respective field, these typically either addressed the individual, or the group level, or the institutional level and they often were ignoring or excluding other disciplines and perspectives – in short they seemed unconnected. The author’s impression was – in order to understand why this was the case – he had to go to the very foundations of management thinking – the research philosophy of management.

The aims of the study were to better understand the theoretical foundations and practical implications of complex social interaction in organizational innovation settings. The goal was not to test any existing models or hypotheses but rather to set out to discover how one could grasp complex social interaction across different units of analysis. Drawing on explorative projects the author had the opportunity to conduct with students – involving firms and using interviews and video analysis – and explored different theoretical perspectives in relation to practice. In further workshops and experiments he found evidence that play and games could be interesting perspectives to take in order to understand complex social interaction.

The author comes to the conclusion that – in innovation settings – the social dynamics that affect the process are essentially about transformation of knowledge across boundaries. By proposing a multi-level conceptual framework to understand and analyze social dynamics of participatory innovation in organizations the author complements research on knowledge transformation when facing novelty (Carlile, 2004) and participatory innovation (Buur and Matthews, 2008; Buur and Larsen, 2010). Further, based on this the theoretical and practical links between innovation as a social process across boundaries, play and games, learning, and design in organizational settings are carved out. Thus, confirming and complement work in the field of play (e.g. Kaark, 2011; Sandelands, 2010; Mainemelis and Ronson, 2006;), learning and play (e.g. Brown and Vaughan, 2010; Thomas and Brown, 2011; Kolb and Kolb, 2010), games (e.g. McGonigal, 2011; Mäyrä, 2008), and innovation across knowledge boundaries (e.g. Carlile, 2004; Nicolini et al, 2011; Buur and Matthews, 2008). Further, it is clarified how the proposed approach differs from system thinking and game theory – and first evidence is provided for that playful games are promising as a tool, a method, and a process to grasp and research social dynamics of participatory innovation theoretically and practically. It is argued, that the idea to use playful games in the proposed way is new and can provide new insights in participatory innovation. Further, it is said that this approach opens up promising ways of interdisciplinary research between design and management. Generally, the playful approach is expected to help understanding of social dynamics of participatory innovation and to embrace a new culture of learning as proposed by Thomas and Brown (2011). Playful games are seen as objects that can help researchers and practitioners to learn together across boundaries and discover new aspects of innovation. The way games can enable that is surprisingly simple – because they can provide shared experiences in a fearless context that allows conversations about innovation to change – thus changing the way we think (and act) about challenges, process, and ourselves.

1. Think of a modest interpretation of the word – i.e. that in order to be an innovation something does not need to be new to the world in all aspects but new to the context in which it happens.