

Mutual Learning or Mutual Disappointment

Jakob E. Bardram

*Department of Computer Science, University of Aarhus, and Kommunedata
DK-8000 Aarhus C, Denmark
bardram@daimi.aau.dk*

In the context of this debate forum I will tentatively coin two concepts to be used as mediators in an exchange of viewpoint, namely *mutual learning* and *mutual disappointment*. I will illustrate and discuss the two terms based on two personal cases: the paper published in this issue of SJIS by Henfridsson, Holmström & Söderholm, and the critique published in the debate forum of the last issue by Bjerknes.

Mutual Learning

The paper by Henfridsson *et al.* calls for an increased level of professionalism in the community of SJIS in our use of the notion of organisation, and to base this professionalism on a less common sense

and more theoretically-based use of the concept. This is a very important point in itself and something that I indeed welcome. The argument is based on a review of all papers published in SJIS, and argues that my paper on Organisational Prototyping (SJIS Vol. 8, No. 1) understands organisational behaviour solely as work. The argument is based on my admittedly rather broad definition of an adoption process as “a dual process of both adapting the tool to the organisation and adapting the work practice to the conditions of the tool.” Henfridsson *et al.* argue that “[t]his quote shows that Bardram sees organisation and work practice as the same thing.” Well, actually I do not. But I agree that that is not very obvious in the paper. The reason for using the term organisation on the one hand and the term work-practice on the other actually reflects the fact that I want

to incorporate more in the adoption process than just work-processes. In my current work in Danish hospitals I make a clear distinction between organisational and work-practice issues. It would be rather difficult to understand the work within a hospital without taking into consideration the complex organisational and socio-political issues at stake there. For this purpose, however, I am afraid that the conceptualisation of an organisation, provided by Henfridsson et al., might be too simplistic in its view on the organisation solely in terms of structural and behavioural properties.

However, the argument that they made informs me that I have not been careful enough to describe what the aim of the definition actually was and how the concept of organisation was to be understood in the context of the paper and the method. Hence by reading the paper by Henfridsson et al. I learned that my paper has a weakness in conveying that idea to my audience. Hence, such mutual learning is a basis for further development of ideas in the scientific debate.

Mutual Disappointment

Bjerknes, on the other hand, provides two short and imprecise lines of criticism under the heading “Nothing I could use at all”. First that the idea of Organisational Prototyping was what was taking place in the Florence project 10 year ago, and second that the method is “rather superflous when it comes to more profound organisational problems, and it didn’t say a lot about how to cope with technological constraints.”

These are not very accurate points of criticism. As for the first line of ‘criti-

cism’ I do not consider this a problem of the paper or the method. The paper explicitly takes the tradition of Participatory Design (PD) as its starting point, and therefore obviously reflects prior scientific work done within this tradition. The aim of the paper was in this sense to provide a method that could support the concept of ‘mutual learning’ in a design situation.

For the second line of criticism, the paper never claims to address ‘profound organisational problems’ or to be ‘revolutionary’. However, this critique of Bjerknes, as opposed to that of Henfridsson et al., is of a character that makes it impossible for me to learn how I could solve the problem. Bjerknes writes that the paper is useless without even taking the time to explain why. It would indeed have been interesting if she had been able to share with me—and other readers of SJIS—the insight from the Florence project or from her current occupation, which makes the method so obviously useless just by reading about it and not even trying to apply it. Bjerknes writes that she was really disappointed, unfortunately without saying how and why, which leads me to categorise her critique under the term mutual disappointment rather than mutual learning in the context of scientific discourse. This is of course meant in a slightly provocative sense because I do find it interesting to learn of any problems the method might suffer from, seen from a practitioner’s perspective – an insight that might supplement my experiences from applying the method in cooperation with Kommunedata.

Mutuality between Research and Practice

Bjerknes says in the end of her short letter that SJIS researchers do not inform practice. If this is true this is indeed a very unfortunate situation. I shall not claim to be an expert on this issue but I will use the opportunity to leverage the discussion based on my own experiences. The relation between research and practice is a very old and recurrent debate in society. One attempt to overcome the barrier between research and practice is to engage in a constructive debate. This can be done by assigning people to bridge the gap by belonging to both communities. One such institutionalised way of supporting this strategy is evident in the program of Industrial Research Fellows (IRF) as practised in the Danish educational system. As an IRF employed at Kommunedata in Denmark, I am faced with the need for transforming my research as a Ph.D. student into practical useful concepts and methods. The method of Organisational Prototyping is one example of this more pragmatic focus of my research and has been applied within Kommunedata.

The relationship between research and practice has been the subject of several discussions between me and employees at Kommunedata, especially management. What came as a rather big surprise to me when I started at Kommunedata was that theoretical work at a rather high level was indeed valuable, even though such scientific contributions were not physically evident in the products produced. As the R&D manager argued, it provides a background that is necessary in order to orient yourself towards overall goals. The big problem

was often that there was no time for and training in gathering scientific results. Hence, an important role for me as an IRF was to provide overviews and résumés of relevant scientific work. In this effort scientific journals, such as SJIS, and conference proceedings, played a major role.

As the national representative of all IRFs I have some insight into the working of the Danish Academy of Technical Sciences, which is the institution that handles IRF education in Denmark. The Academy is an institution with a budget of several million Danish kroner with the sole purpose of mediating the relationships between research and practice, and has in addition to IFR education several other activities oriented toward this overall purpose. This objective is thus addressed in several ways and a huge effort is put into it. This is just to say that it is indeed not a simple, let alone an unaddressed, question that is raised here. However, the idea of applying IRFs seems to be successful in pursuing this overall goal of engaging research and practice with each other. The IRF educational system has just been subject to a rather extensive evaluation that looked at the benefits for both research and industry. There was a general agreement that the system was of great benefit. Even in cases where there was no direct exploitation of the scientific result of the Ph.D. project, the industry all said that the sheer contact with and knowledge of the universities and the research done there was of profound value for them. On the other hand, the universities also found it valuable to have a close contact with industry. The conclusion was, accordingly, that it was important that both sides engage in the active intellectual work of

thinking science into practice and practice into science. Hence, the mutual exchange of ideas and problems was crucial and has been found to be supported thus far very effectively by actually dedicating this job to a person like an IRF.