

Socio-technical infrastructuring for participation

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Abstract. In this position paper we elaborate on our experience in creating a socio-technical infrastructure to support active engagement of students in a design project run in an Italian University, a context characterized by limited possibilities for direct participation. We believe that active participation needs to be supported by a receptive context, whose establishment can be encouraged by an effort of social and technical infrastructuring.

Innovation milieu

Current approaches to social innovation may demonstrate considerable weaknesses when stretched to fit the public sphere (Dalsgaard, 2010), for instance in terms of context. Each initiative for active civic engagement is in fact conditioned by the innovation milieu in which it is placed and by the specific characteristics of the latter. Our case study is set in Italy, a country which is increasingly disengaging from participation in public matters: this attitude is clearly witnessed by the number of voters, which fell from 94% in 1976 to 75% in 2013¹. This disengagement is also visible in other public, more local institutions:

¹ <http://elezionistorico.interno.it/>

for example, at the University of Trento, only 17% of the students participated in the last elections to choose the student representatives. As for PhD candidates, last elections at the Computer Science department had a turnout of only 9%. In this context, a number of initiatives subsuming active and democratic participation have been launched: among these, the *Smart Campus* project tries to actively engage students in participating to campus matters.

The Smart Campus project

The *Smart Campus* project was born two years ago in order to empower the local University students to more actively contribute in designing and developing services for their own community, fostering their participation in campus matters; at the same time, the project aims to build a socio-technical infrastructure for the local Province to establish a Living Lab on the territory. The University campus acted as the playground to experiment with a vision emphasizing the role of the community as decision-maker and service-builder. The project unfolds on concepts of social innovation (Björgvinsson et al., 2010) and experiments with an extreme form of PD (Ehn, 1998) leading to participatory development, where students designed and coded mobile applications fulfilling their own needs by leveraging on the provided technical environment.

The role of the students' community, which now counts approximately 500 members, evolved during the project. At the beginning, students were participants of user studies in order to understand what issues in their opinion were negatively affecting their daily experience of academic life; their role was constrained to that of testers and informants, as they were denied a role in decision-making. As time passed, however, the socio-technical infrastructure started to shape, thus influencing the milieu: a service platform was developed and activities for seeding a culture of participation and ensuring institutional support were undertaken. As a result, students now have a stronger voice in the design and decision making process. For example, a mobile app about the canteen services, called *iFame*, has been designed and developed entirely by students, with the organizational support of the *Smart Campus* staff: *iFame* has been released to the whole of the University students a few months ago and is generating a community of its own, which rates the food served at the campus canteens. An application for student assessments of the educational offering is currently under development in a similar environment as well. This suggests that we succeeded in creating a space for community-based development, and at the same time in creating a receptive environment for participation.

References

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