Chapter 1

The Relationship Between User Participation and the Management of Change Surrounding the Development of Information Systems: A European Perspective

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While much is known about the general process of user participation in information systems development, its impact on matters of organisational change has not been the subject of systematic, in-depth investigation. In addition, researchers have typically adopted variance, rather than process-based approaches to the study of these related phenomena. This paper addresses these deficiencies and makes several important contributions to the literature. First, it presents the results of a comprehensive, process-based study of the relationship between user participation and organisational change in the development and implementation of information systems in a large organisation. Second, it presents a theoretical model which captures the institutional and development-related contexts that shape and influence the processes of user participation and management of change. Third, using the model as a framework to guide the research effort, this study illustrates that an organisation’s institutional context plays a dominant role in shaping and influencing the content and process of user participation and management of
change in systems development. This particular finding has important implications for both research and practice. Finally, the model and its associated framework has been validated by the findings of this study; it may, therefore, be used in future explorations of these important phenomena.

INTRODUCTION

Information systems development is a multi-dimensional change process that presents itself simultaneously within several related social environments—as a reality, it is socially constructed (Visala, 1991). The conventional wisdom within the information systems community argues that user participation is a core ingredient in this change process and is vital for successful outcomes in terms of both process and product (see Ives and Olson, 1984). However, two comprehensive reviews of research on the phenomenon of user participation revealed that the relationship between user participation and successful systems development is neither grounded in theory nor substantiated by research data (see Ives and Olson, 1984 and Cavaye, 1995). In addition, this paper argues that insufficient attention has been paid to the relationship that exists between user participation in systems development and the issue of organisational change surrounding the development and implementation of information systems: as a consequence, that relationship remains ill-defined and thus little understood. In order to address this deficiency, the study maintains that it is only by conceptualizing information systems development as a change process (Boland, 1978; Lyytinen, 1987), and by adopting a perspective that incorporates both user participation and management of change as being instrumental in determining the ultimate success of developed systems, can the relationship between these two concepts and their consequences be evaluated, explained, and understood. A conceptual model that incorporates the institutional context or framework within which the IS development sub-processes of user participation and management of change are effected, and which attempts to capture the interrelationships between factors that are posited to constitute these sub-processes is presented. The model’s core components are drawn from institutional theory (North, 1990; Rowlinson, 1997), Cavaye’s (1995) analytic framework, which was extended and elaborated by Butler and Fitzgerald (1997), and from seminal contributions of previous research on the phenomena of user participation and systems implementation (see Boland, 1978; Ives and Olson, 1984; and Orlikowski, 1993). The model helped formulate appropriate research questions to guide and direct case description, report its findings, and make appropriate conclusions.

As Orlikowski’s (1993; p. 310) seminal investigation of the relationship between CASE and organisational change revealed, a process-based approach incorporating grounded theory “allows a focus on contextual and processual
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