



# Relational sensitivity and participatory practice

Exploring *poise* and *punctuation* through an empirical study

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## ABSTRACT

Poise – self-awareness of how one is and acts, and punctuation – attunement to relational dynamics, describe integral relational sensitivities for practitioners in Participatory Design (PD). These concepts describe important personal and embodied “practices of readiness” for participating in contingent and relational processes of designing with others. However, more attention on these “practices of readiness” is required in design research and design training to better comprehend and develop relevant relational sensitivity and competences. Through an empirical study, this paper explores what relational sensitivity i.e., poise and punctuation, could be in a participatory practice and what it can do for the process. The paper also explores ways in which relational sensitivity could be nurtured through participatory practices. This research contributes to PD literature by connecting concepts related to relational sensitivity with an empirical study, elaborating on the role of relational sensitivity in PD practice.

## CCS CONCEPTS

• Human-centered computing; • Interaction design processes and methods; • Participatory design;

## KEYWORDS

relational sensitivity, punctuation, poise, participatory practice

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

Navigating participatory processes is not just a question of methods but how practitioners and participants embody these. Personal histories, experiences, cultures, and philosophies affect how one is and acts, how one attunes and responds to design situations, which affects how participatory practices unfold. To describe personal and embodied dimensions of participatory practitioners, Yoko Akama and Ann Light [1, 2] compose the concepts *poise* – an awareness for how one is and acts, and *punctuation* – an awareness for the

relational dynamics. *Poise* and *punctuation* constitute “practices of readiness” – relational sensitivities that are integral for participating in flexible and evolving conditions of designing with others. Akama and Light deliberate on the role of relational sensitivity in their participatory practices which has a foundational role for building respectful relationships and navigating processes as a design facilitator [1, 2]. The authors also deliberate on what happens when practitioners are not relationally sensitive – seemingly unaware of how they are and act and are not responsive to group dynamics – describing how this can possibly discourage participation [5].

Despite personal and embodied aspects being integral to how methods are implemented and how practices unfold – Akama and Light note an absence of this lens in PD literature that focuses predominantly on the techniques and formal methods in ICT development ([1]:2). The authors also note a gap in formal design training in developing skills for design facilitation, despite this being a common role of participatory practitioners and for negotiating ‘matters of concern’ ([1]:2). The concepts *poise* and *punctuation* is a starting point to bring transparency and reflection on to relational sensitivities that are implicit and important for participatory practices.

This paper builds on the work of Akama and Light [1] with a continued exploration of *poise* and *punctuation* in relation to an empirical study – a PD team in the initial phase of planning a project and writing a funding application. The purpose of this paper is to reflect on what relational sensitivity could mean in participatory practice and what implications relational sensitivity could have for the process. Moreover, since the empirical study accounts for the early phases of a project, the paper aims to deliberate on how relational sensitivity could be nurtured through participatory practice – inviting other participants into developing a relational sensitivity. The contribution of this work is to connect the concepts *poise* and *punctuation* to an empirical study and to elaborate on the role and meaning of relational sensitivity in PD practices.

## 2 PUNCTUATION AND POISE

The concepts *poise* and *punctuation* articulate relational sensitivities that are important for and part of participatory practices. *Poise* “shares characteristics of self-awareness, of being emplaced, and a contemplation of how one is and acts” [[1], p. 2], and accounts for our personal histories and philosophy that penetrate what we do. *Punctuation* refers to an attention and attunement to dynamics and relations in design situations. *Poise* and *punctuation* can be understood as different sides of the same coin, taking on different perspectives [1]. While *poise* focuses on self-awareness, *punctuation* accounts for relational dynamics, of which both are interconnected.



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Different practitioners will embody and practice *poise* and *punctuation* in different ways depending on their personality and backgrounds. Through an autoethnographic approach, Akama and Light [1] reflect on and reveal ways in which they embody *poise* and *punctuation*. Akama exemplifies *poise* by referring to her Japanese heritage and Zen practice, which foreground a respect when entering relationships. She describes her background and philosophy as bringing a heightened presence and participation in transient, everyday encounters. Light exemplifies *punctuation* through her practice as a design facilitator (with training and background in drama) in which she attunes to and immerses with the collaborative dynamics. Attuning to the “flows, gaps, and rhythms of change” ([1]:10) supports Light to respond to the emergent dynamics and to adjust activities in design situations. Light uses material artefacts to “punctuate” or mark transitions in relation to the relational flux and changes. Through these examples, Akama and Light discuss the role of *poise* and *punctuation* in their practices which pertain to ethical dimensions of nurturing respectful relationships and crucial skills in design facilitation for navigating collaborative encounters.

Other design researchers also emphasize the importance of participatory practitioners’ self-awareness and attunement to relational dynamics and deliberate on ways of training participatory practitioners in relevant sensitivities and competences. The “Sensethic” perspective in PD, a practice developed from psychotherapy, describes the role of embodied awareness for becoming aware of one’s preferences, needs and values [7]. An embodied awareness – sensing and acknowledging emotions, thoughts, sensations, is considered important in PD where participants ought to know and be able to express their genuine interests to influence the process [8]. Simonsen and Jensen [7] describe a training with design students in “Sensethic” practices and embodied awareness. The authors report that the students acknowledged learning a relevant, body-related competence that was not familiar to them in the university curriculum which is more “in the head” ([7]:48). Both Akama and Light [1] and Simonsen and Jensen [7] account of a relational sensitivity that is based on self-awareness and an awareness of relational dynamics. In both works the focus lies on the relational sensitivity of the participatory design practitioners and not of other participants.

### 3 EMPIRICAL STUDY

The following section describes the empirical study, methods and analysis designed to deliberate on relational sensitivity in participatory practice.

#### 3.1 Description

The empirical study chosen for exploring relational sensitivity in participatory practices focuses a PD team during the initiation phase of a five-year funded PD project – in the project planning and funding-application writing. The PD team, having different backgrounds (in microbiology, business, theatre, gender studies, design, and art), deliberated on the various perspectives and values that were surfacing and shaping of the project plan and collaborative process. The process of explicitly deliberating on diverse values and perspectives seemed appropriate for exploring *poise* and *punctuation* as both involve self-awareness and inquiring on the relational dynamics.

The PD project in question was the co-creation of a physical infrastructure – a meeting place for and by students at a university campus in Sweden. The project was commissioned by a real-estate company and the PD team (of which the author was a part of) was responsible to initiating and involving students in a participatory process. The PD team knew each other previously from organizing participatory festivals (i.e., The Borderland – a Burning Man-like festival in Scandinavia). The PD team also had trainings in facilitation and communication practices like “Authentic Relating” (a practice focused on embodied awareness and expressing one’s experiences).

As this empirical study focuses on the planning- and writing process of PD project, this research could be relevant to other collaborative practices other than PD projects. None-the-less, the focus on the initial stages of a project could be valuable to PD research to account for various phases in a PD project other than “co-design events” i.e., workshops with users. By reflecting on the initiation phase of a PD project – on the values, perspectives and dynamics that emerge – this could offer important reflections for developing the process and conditions for including other participants. Akin to Susan Kozel [4], by writing a paper at the start of a project, it gives the opportunity to reflect on and develop the project going forward, i.e., how to invite others into a participatory process.

#### 3.2 Research methods and analysis

Three out of five members from the PD team were involved in the data collection and analysis. The three members (including the author of this paper) were involved in writing an additional funding application for the PD project during six weeks in May and June 2021. This writing-process enabled deeper deliberations on values and perspectives of the PD team. An auto-ethnographic approach was used where the three members of the PD team journaled their experiences after each of the eight writing- and planning meetings. The autoethnographic approach centred on bringing personal experiences to the fore and on collectively analysing the content [3]. After the application-writing process, the three members had a meeting to discuss and collectively analyse the journal notes. This conversation was voice-recorded and focused on the dynamics and values that emerged in the writing- and planning process. The joint analysis of the journal notes was important as to avoid decontextualizing data and single interpretations [3]. For this same reason, the members of the application-writing process had the opportunity to read and comment on drafts of the paper.

The concepts *poise* and *punctuation* were introduced but not used for deliberation among the members of the PD team due to the terminology not being easily grasped nor remembered. Instead, the following model (figure 1) was used by the PD team in the joint analysis. Alongside the discussion, the members wrote down notes onto a large piece of paper with the model on it. The model distinguishes between different dimensions of a collaboration: the subjective “I” (personal desires and convictions), intersubjective “We” (culture, relationships) and objective “It” (concrete structures and procedures). The model originates from Integral Theory [9] and was adapted by Daniel Ofman [6] to be used in organizational development. This model highlights that all these dimensions are present at any given moment and therefore require attention in

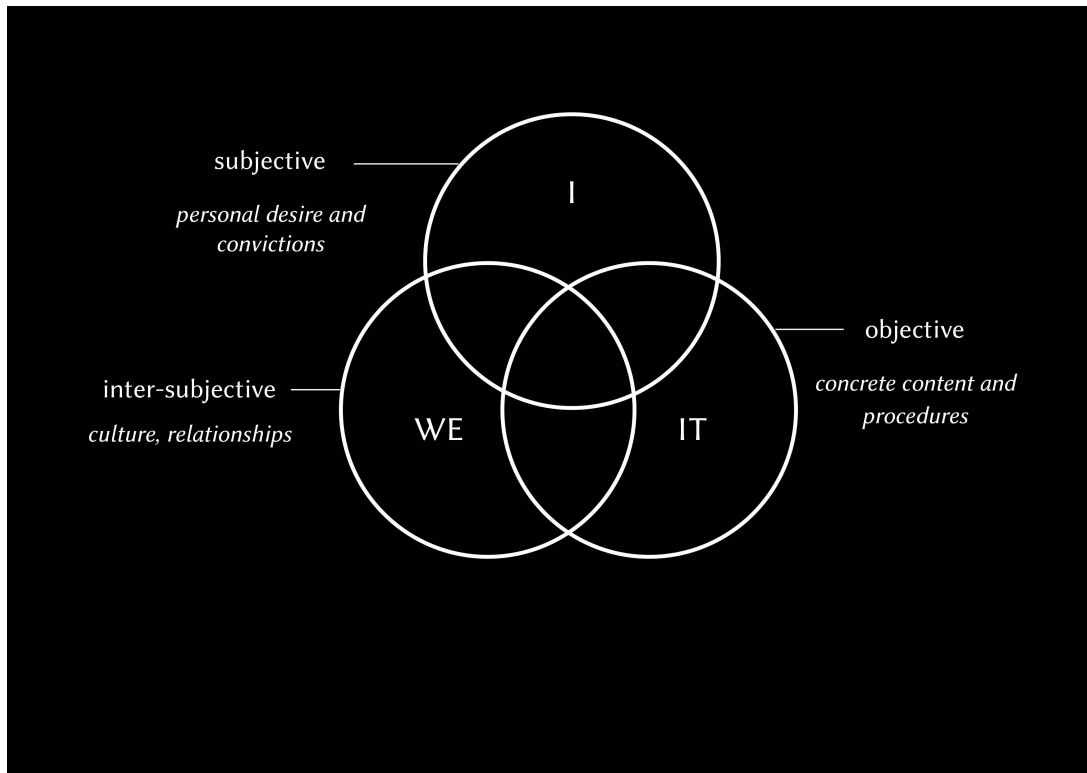


Figure 1: I-WE-IT model, drawn by Laura Gottlieb.

a collaborative process. The Venn-diagram shape highlights that all the dimensions overlap and are interconnected. The “I” perspective can be seen as closely related *poise* (which focuses on the individual’s self-awareness) and the “We” perspective is related to *punctuation* (focusing on awareness of the collective dynamics). What is interesting about this model is that it also includes an “It” perspective – the concrete content and procedures (for example, the physical room, and number of people involved). By using the model in the joint analysis, an intention was to explore these various dimensions and how they interrelate.

## 4 FINDINGS

The following section discloses themes that emerged in the joint analysis of the PD team around the subjective, intersubjective, and objective realms of the collaboration. To keep the focus on the dynamics and content and to not reveal specific identities of the other people involved, pseudonyms are used for the three members in the PD team – Fen, Pan and Dem. The author of this paper is under the pseudonym Dem.

### 4.1 Visceral responses

In the first two meetings, there were discussions on the different vocabularies used. Words like “prosumer”, and “blueprints of the social world” were used by both Fen and Pan, which prompted visceral responses in Dem – tensions and confusion. After persistent

questions from Dem on the meaning of these words, the three renegotiate which words to use.

### 4.2 Polarities

Pan sensed a lack of cohesion in the group in relation to discussing which terminology to use. Upon this, Pan stopped the writing process to explore the different emerging values and perspectives. Pan frames these differences as “polarities” – opposite poles on a spectrum. On the one pole, Pan identifies the value for *efficiency* to be fast in writing the application – a value that can be linked to Pan and Fen. On the other pole, there is a value for *care* about which words to use – a value linked to Dem. Another polarity that was noted by Pan was *theory* and *practice*. Fen was emphasizing the hands-on, practical task of writing the application, while Pan and Dem were considering theoretical models relevant for the research project. By framing these as polarities, Pan expressed the intention of including both poles of a polarity and to avoid choosing between “either this or that perspective”. Pan asks what would happen if we included and transcended polarities to create something new. At the end of the meeting, Pan and Dem discuss feeling a greater intimacy with themselves by clarifying which poles they gravitate towards, and an excitement for transcending and including perspectives.

### 4.3 Exclusion

As the application deadline approaches, Pan takes on the larger role in rewriting the application, making the budget, and structuring

the planned activities for the PD project. Dem supports the process by reading the texts and tending to the writing space with lunches and refreshments. Fen is no longer present in the finalising of the application. Just before sending off the application, a meeting is held with the other members of the PD team. Pan presents and describes the project plan to the PD team while Fen and Dem listen to the presentation. In the end of the writing process, Dem no longer feels a clear role nor ownership of the project plan which mostly Pan has constructed.

In the recorded conversation after the planning- and writing process, Fen, Pan and Dem acknowledge a theme of exclusion. Fen felt excluded from the process by Pan and Dem's interest in polarities – aspects that Pan and Dem had also been discussing outside of the writing- and planning meetings. During the writing process, Fen continuously said that the group does not need to go into such depths for a funding application. Fen admits to usually gravitating towards theoretical discussions but that in relation to the application-writing and to Dem and Pan (who Fen worries is too much on the “theoretical side”), Fen is focused on practicalities and the outcome. Fen considered conversations on “transcending polarities” as unnecessary in the writing process. In the recorded conversation, the three members acknowledge the difficulty of knowing when topics may be relevant or not. The three members recognize the value of continuing conversations on terminology, underlying assumptions, and polarities in the PD project, yet to be more careful of when to engage in such discussions.

## 5 DISCUSSION

The following section reflects on the empirical study in relation to relational sensitivity, i.e. *poise* and *punctuation* – what it could be in the participatory practice, what it could do for the practice, and ways to nurture relational sensitivity through practice. Limitations of the study and future work are also discussed.

### 5.1 Relational sensitivity in participatory practice

Using the concepts *poise* and *punctuation* in relation to an empirical study, this paper deliberates on what relational sensitivity could be in participatory practice. As emphasized by Simonsen and Jensen [7], a significant aspect of relational sensitivity that emerged in this study was the role of embodied awareness for *poise* and *punctuation*. In the journal notes, the team members noted down their experiences of sensations, thoughts, emotions. For example, Dem noticed and expressed tensions and confusions around the vocabulary used (section 4.1) and Pan noticed a lack of cohesion in the group in relation to this inquiry (section 4.2). The noticing of individual experiences like tensions could be described by the concept *poise*, an embodied self-awareness of arising emotion, sensations, and thoughts. *Punctuation* also involved an embodied awareness but focusing on the group dynamics. An example of this is when Pan noticed a lack of cohesion and tensions in the group. Embodied awareness was therefore part of a relational sensitivity in this empirical study.

Another significant aspect to relational sensitivity in this empirical study was the externalising of embodied awareness – expressing subjective and intersubjective experiences to the other members.

There was a process of “making the internal external” in which relational sensitivity became a shared process of noticing and becoming aware of each other's experiences. This process externalising and sensitizing to various experiences differs from the relational sensitivity that is described in Akama and Light [1, 2] and Simonsen and Jensen [7]. The authors focus on the practitioners' own awareness which is not described as being explicit. This reveals different ways of working with relational sensitivity in PD practices.

Both explicit and implicit *poise* and *punctuation*, as described in the empirical study and the above-mentioned authors, show a relational sensitivity that influences the objective realm – content and procedures. For example, by sensing a lack of cohesion in the group, Pan stopped the writing process to clarify and include diverse perspectives and values (section 4.2). This shows an interconnection between dimensions of the I-WE-IT model (figure 1). By noticing the internal process (the subjective and intersubjective realm) there was responses and changes in the content and procedures (the objective realm). Relational sensitivity therefore pertains to the subjective, intersubjective, and objective realms.

### 5.2 Relational sensitivity for participatory practice

The relational sensitivity described in this research, as relating to embodied awareness and an explicit process of sharing impressions, contributed to the participatory practice in the following ways. By “making the internal external”, Pan and Dem discussed feeling an intimacy with themselves by clarifying on how they gravitate towards different perspectives and values (section 4.2). An explicit and collective *poise* and *punctuation* could therefore possibly support participatory practice by deepening self-awareness and awareness for the group dynamics. This could be important for deepening an awareness for how one is part shaping the process.

An intention for the collective and explicit *poise* and *punctuation* was to include diverse perspectives and values in the PD project plan. Simonsen and Jensen [7] also frame the importance of an embodied awareness for participatory practice for participants to sense and express their genuine interests – to influence and shape the process. However, the findings in the paper reveals the complexity of inclusion in participatory processes. Despite the intention to include diverse perspectives and values in the project, the journal notes and joint analysis reveals themes of exclusion. For instance, Fen felt excluded from the process due to Pan and Dem's interest in “polarities” and Dem did not feel a sense of ownership in the project due to Pan's large role in rewriting the project proposal (section 4.3). Different interests and competences came to have a greater influence in how the process and outcome were formed – despite an embodied awareness, expressing genuine interests, and intending to include diverse values and perspective. Although relational sensitivity did not guarantee the level of intended participation and inclusion, it could be seen as contributing to a care and critical inquiry in relation to the group dynamics. Inquiry on the dynamics was important for the group to deliberate on the collaboration going forward and how to bring more care to aspects of inclusion. However, the study also brings up the importance of considering the timing of when to deliberate on dynamics as this may not be considered appropriate (section 4.3).

### 5.3 Relational sensitivity through participatory practice

This research describes a relational sensitivity that pertains to an embodied awareness and “making the internal external”. These aspects contributed to deepening a sense of awareness – understanding one’s perspective more clearly in relation to others and influenced how the group navigated the process (section 4.2). The following rubrics deliberate on how relational sensitivity could be nurtured through participatory practice:

**5.3.1 Shared context for communication.** The PD team knew each other prior from organising participatory festivals and shared experiences in communicative- and facilitation practices. This basis contributed to a process of noticing internal experiences and explicitly reflecting on the group dynamics and tensions that arose. The shared context for communication of the PD team (i.e., “Authentic Relating” and facilitation) involve an embodied awareness to sense subtleties in communication and to reveal these experiences. To nurture a relational sensitivity, participatory practitioners could train communicative practices involving “making the internal external” and how to set contexts for communication – modelling and inviting participants into such practices.

**5.3.2 Polarity framing.** Framing diverse perspectives and values in terms of polarities seemed to be useful for sharpening *poise* and *punctuation*. The polarity framing brought a meta-perspective to the process which both Dem and Pan expressed feeling a sense of clarity about their own values and perspectives. However, such abstractions need to be carefully used as these may not be considered useful nor relevant by everyone (section 4.3).

**5.3.3 I-WE-IT Modell.** Using the I-WE-IT model and categories [7] in the joint analysis brought the PD team’s attention to these various realms of the collaboration. This could be useful in participatory practices to emphasize and deliberate on the integral role and importance of the subjective, intersubjective, and objective dimensions of a collaboration (and their interconnection). The I-WE-IT model was more straightforward to use than the concepts *poise* and *punctuation* which the PD members struggled to remember.

### 5.4 Limitations and future work

A limitation of this work is that relational sensitivity is solely studied from the PD team’s journal notes and audio recording from the joint analysis session. Studying and analysing relational sensitivity through what the members considered “note-worthy” painted a particular picture of relational sensitivity which focused on stronger experiences like tension or excitement (sections 4.1, 4.2). Expanding the ways of studying relational sensitivity, such as through video recording, could add other dimensions that may not be apparent to the practitioners.

In continuing this research, I would like to study processes of collective and explicit *poise* and *punctuation* with participants who are not experienced in communicative contexts centred on embodied awareness and “making the internal external”. This focus acknowledges that all participants are part of an ecology and shape the group dynamics. Nurturing all participants’ relational sensitivity

could be important for participants to express their genuine interests and needs and for collectively navigating differences. In future research, I will also include other methods of studying relational sensitivity, i.e., video recordings.

## 6 CONCLUSION

Considering the integral role of embodied and personal dimensions of participatory practices, this paper deliberates on relational sensitivity in connection to participatory practice through an empirical study. This study reveals a collective and explicit *poise* and *punctuation*, involving the noticing of and sharing subjective and intersubjective experiences. The relational sensitivity centred on embodied awareness (noticing emotions, sensations, and thoughts) and “making the internal external” (expressing these experiences). The collective and explicit *poise* and *punctuation* contributed to the collaborative process with a critical inquiry on the group dynamics and to a relational understanding of perspectives and values – noticing how these are influenced and shaped by each other. To nurture relational sensitivity through participatory practices, practitioners could train competences in and facilitate communication practices that include embodied awareness and “making the internal external”. In this way, “practices of readiness” could include other participants in becoming aware of internal experiences and group dynamics, which could support participants to express genuine interests and collectively navigate differences. In the future, this research will explore other methods for studying relational sensitivity and invite further participants into practices of explicit and collective *poise* and *punctuation*.

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