
Products and processes open to participation

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Typewriters and the experience of writing a letter.

Products vs processes

A product can be any object that can be offered in a market and that satisfies a wish or a need of a given consumer. Products can be understood as industrial products, that is, the results of a process of fabrication. But we cannot take for granted that products are physical objects. Products can have a very ethereal reality: a touristic route, a massage, a show, a lesson, and advice...

On the other hand, processes are sets of operations, reactions, calculations or the steps that are needed to change some given initial features. What is relevant for a process is its ability to induce change or transformation.

We live with products and processes every day in a very natural fashion. Creating a product requires a process. The realization of a process ends up with the development of products. A process can be a product. This is not a problem, in principle. If times were not changing as they are, we wouldn't even bother to talk about products and processes. Where do dissonances occur?. Let's go step by step. Let's try to unveil the mystery of the process of writing this blog entry, which is our final product.

Processing dissonances.

The word “process” became very important during the second half of the XXth century, very probably because of cybernetics, computation and systems theory. For a long time, our focus was set on the results of our actions. We lived in “product times”. Cybernetics, computation and systems theory made visible the difficulties of programming changes and transformations. In doing so, they suggested the need to be more attentive to processes. We live in “days of processes” but products are still on the market!. What has changed?

Nowadays we don't only give value to results but also to the path followed towards this result. In fact, we have learnt to see these paths, when, in the past, we usually forgot about them. With this learning also we have been made conscious of the fact that, although the focus is on the process (enjoy, have experiences, etc.), we still put it on the product (clothes, books, swimming pools and many other surrounding objects). In other words, even if most processes and products live together in harmony, most of the times one is more relevant than the other. This difference can have important consequences.

The XXth Century: the century of openness!

If the XXth century has brought us processes, it also has brought *open* processes of interaction, participation and co-creation. Increasingly, more initiatives pop up that invite citizens to start collaborating with each other. We live days of “co-”: “co-creation”, “co-production”, “co-ownership”, “co-working”. The “co-” philosophy has wonderful facets and, I think, it represents a general positive trend in humanity. But it also has important dangers

What happens when we open a process where the important part, the focus of action, is the process itself? What happens when we open a process where the most relevant part is the resulting product? And what happens when we open to participation an action whose result will be beneficial to humanity in general but there is a chance, however slight, that the result of the participatory process developed ends up in the hands of just a few?.

Let's take the case where we open up a learning process where the most important thing is that a given group, that is invited to participate, obtains new knowledge. If we start this process and we think that participation will result in greater, deeper learning, openness is justified by our goals. It is a well-known fact of learning, that teaching is learning twice. If, for a student to better acquire knowledge about, say, fractions it is more interesting that we invite him or her to shoot a video about fractions than submitting the student to a long-winding lecture about mathematics, let's do it!. In this case, the product, a videoclip, will be interesting, but the focus will be clearly on the process. We'd like the student to behave independently, perform

information research, analysis, and process. Finally the student organizes this information as a video script, learning in the process how to translate it into the language of images. Eventually the student will be able to observe the result and even evaluate it!.

If what we open, on the other hand, is the creative process leading to a new advertising campaign, with the only goal of developing a business strategy that will attract more consumers, then we, again, have a very effective method, but we don't have a justified openness. In this case we are just lowering costs and improving efficiency. The focus is on the result, the product, but not on the process. Let's add that if this process is presented to the public straightforwardly in its real terms and the public still wants to participate, because they feel that they will be compensated in some other way, then let's welcome this initiative too!. Eventually, everything is an interchange. The important thing is that all sides feel compensated. Personally, I am not that comfortable with participatory processes that just focus on the product.

The biggest difficulties arise when things are not white, nor black but grey!

In "twilight zones" difficulties pose even bigger challenges. Sometimes the focus is on the product but it has a positive impact on humanity. Take for example the cure for a disease or the creation of a given content. It is difficult not to agree that for these goals, the more people that gets involved, the more we open the process, the better. I am the first to be in favour of openness. I'd like to put as an example of success, a product such as Wikipedia. But I also want to flip the coin and look at its other face. In this case, The Huffington Post. All people who devote effort to create participatory processes or who contribute to collective benefits through group collaboration, have the right to attribute themselves the merit of the ideation and realization of the process but they wouldn't be allowed let the benefits be enjoyed by a small and closed group nor allow them to exclusively enrich themselves from the co-created results. If a group develops together something to go forward together, this is something that has to be a progress for all the group not for just some part of it!.

These reflections make me think that is important to understand what process are, what products are, where we put the focus of our actions, which are our goals and what is the return for the involved people, both those who created participatory processes and those who participate in these processes. It is vital that we analyze each case in turn. Not only because I believe that these processes should create collective benefits but because if we don't understand the difference between product and process we will miss the advantages of opening up. I just want to end by bringing these considerations to the world of museums. What is more important for a museum: to have objects, collections and exhibitions or to promote culture and induce social change? Does this correspond to a product or a process? Can we all benefit from these paradigm changes?.