Design for Places of Collaboration

Alexandra Petrakou

Blekinge Institute of Technology
School of Computing
Blekinge Institute of Technology
SE-37179 Karlskrona, Sweden
Abstract
This thesis reports a research effort that comprises six papers and a cover paper. In essence, the thesis contributes to the understanding of collaborative settings by introducing the perspective of ‘places of collaboration’. This perspective is particularly important when designing computer-based technologies that support collaborative settings.

The starting point and overall research aim is to understand people’s efforts to configure their current context for the purposes of collaboration. The cover paper of the thesis comprises a theoretical reflection and examination of four collaborative settings. The settings have been studied in situ through ethnographic inquiry and the results are reported in the six papers enclosed in the thesis. In my theoretical reflection, the concepts of ‘place’, ‘space’ and ‘boundary objects’ are central.

The studies revealed that people’s efforts to configure the current context create and reflect a ‘place of collaboration’. In other words, the effort to configure the context results in a practice characterized by an understanding of how to cooperate; a collaborative practice that constitutes a ‘place of collaboration’. During this configuration, the space and the use of materiality in this space are important parts in the creation of a place of collaboration. In addition, people configure collaborative contexts of intersecting practices by creating boundary objects. Boundary objects serve as mediators in a place-making process for the integration of places into a ‘place of collaboration’ for several practices. What is more, the dynamics of a place of collaboration may affect changes in existing modes of working and in computer-based tools that have been introduced into the workplace. The people and practices that constitute the place will in turn re-configure the place of collaboration, including the space and objects available due to the new circumstances.

People’s configuration of their current context reveals crucial aspects about the place of collaboration that must be considered also when designing to support this setting. However, this configuration may not necessarily equal efficiency and effectiveness, as evaluated by actors external to this context. The conclusion of this thesis is that future research and design should consider how to support people in their own effort to configure their collaborative context.

Keywords
Boundary Objects, Collaborative Settings, Computer-Supported Cooperative Work (CSCW), Design, Place, Places of Collaboration, Space.