PARTICIPATORY LEARNING METHODS
What Are Participatory Learning Methods?

Participatory learning methods are based on experiential learning that lets young people feel, think and act out of their comfort zone in order to challenge stereotypes and become actively involved in pursuing their personal growth whilst developing key life skills.

This booklet contains suggestions for methods that can be used with groups of young people, both in schools and in non-formal settings, to help them think about global issues and develop their sense of themselves as European and global citizens. Participatory learning methods enable young people to acquire the skills and values that allow them to play a role in a democratic society.

Participatory learning methods are based on the holistic approach used in non-formal education. This approach helps to develop lifelong learning and transferrable competences in young people, while addressing curricular subjects’ related issues, both in class or in extra-curricular activities. Each of the methods outlined below can be used or adapted to focus on many different issues and subjects.

Essential features of participatory learning

According to the Council of Europe participatory learning has the following features:

- Participatory and learner-centred
- Holistic and process-oriented
- Close to real-life concerns, experiential and oriented to learning by doing, using intercultural connections and creating empathy
- Voluntary and (ideally) open-access
- Aims above all to convey and practise the values and skills of democratic life
- Balanced interaction between values, knowledge and skills dimensions of learning
- Linking individual and group learning, creating connections at local, regional, national and international level
- Symmetrical teaching/learning power relations.

Source: Council of Europe Symposium on Non-Formal Education: Report (2001)

The role of educators in the learning process

Different learning methods require different approaches to deliver lessons/activities in terms of power dynamics and leadership within the group. Learning environments should to be re-organised to encourage this, and often a simple re-arrangement of chairs into a circle is enough to allow everyone to look into each other’s eyes and have equal opportunities of contributing to the session.

1 For more references about non-formal education UNESCO Non-Formal Education and Basic education reform
Table 1 explains what the roles of teacher, trainer and facilitator are, and highlights the differences between them.

**Table 1. Teacher, trainer and facilitator – definitions**

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<tr>
<th><strong>Teacher</strong></th>
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<tr>
<td>When a teacher walks into a classroom, she/he takes charge of the learning environment. The teacher is responsible for creating lesson plans that direct the course of study that students follow. Clear and concise objectives delineate what the student learns on any given day. The teacher is responsible for measuring how much information the student learns. Evaluation is often in the form of tests, but the teacher may use other measurement tools to determine if the student met the teacher’s learning objectives.</td>
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<td>The learning process is based on national curricula and it is result-oriented.</td>
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<th><strong>Trainer</strong></th>
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<td>Someone who has knowledge and practical experience in a specific topic that he/she transfers via sessions, exercises, case studies, examples and participatory methods. Therefore, a trainer can be considered to be a blend between a teacher and a facilitator. A trainer’s personal skills are as crucial as their knowledge and expertise.</td>
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<td>The learning process is adapted to the needs of the participants and it is both process- and result-oriented in order to develop transferrable competences.</td>
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<td>Learning achievements can be measured by monitoring changes in individual attitudes and actions over time.</td>
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<th><strong>Facilitator</strong></th>
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<td>A facilitator might not be an expert in a particular subject area, like a teacher. However, facilitators do have special training in group dynamics, using processes such as conflict resolution, strategic planning and team building. In any group setting, a facilitator can quickly determine what the group knows so the group can proceed to build on that knowledge. Learning is process-oriented.</td>
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<td>By asking questions and keeping the group focused, a facilitator helps the group establish a set of ground rules, as well as its own learning objectives. The facilitator also helps the group evaluate what group members learned from their activities.</td>
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Methods

In the rest of this booklet, we give instructions for a variety of activities that use participatory learning methods.

Brainstorming (thought shower)

Brainstorming is a way to introduce a new subject, encourage creativity and generate a lot of ideas very quickly. It can be used for solving a specific problem or answering a question. For more information and ideas, visit the Mindtools website.

In practice:

- Decide on the issue that you want to brainstorm and formulate it into a question that has many possible answers.
- Write the question where everyone can see it.
- Ask people to contribute their ideas. Write down the ideas where everyone can see them, for instance, on a flip chart. These should be single words or short phrases.
- Stop the brainstorming when ideas are running out and then go through the suggestions, asking for comments.
- Note these points:
  - Write down every new suggestion. Often, the most creative suggestions are the most useful and interesting!
  - No one should make any comments or judge what is written down until the end, or repeat ideas which have already been said.
  - Encourage everyone to contribute.
  - Only give your own ideas if it is necessary to encourage the group.
  - If a suggestion is unclear, ask for clarification.

Wall writing

This is a form of brainstorming. Participants write their ideas on small pieces of paper (e.g. “sticky notes”) and stick them on a wall. The advantages of this method are that people can sit and think quietly for themselves before they are influenced by the ideas of others, and the pieces of paper can be repositioned to aid the clustering of ideas.

Expectations’ tree: participants write their expectations over the session identifying root (fears), trunk (contributions), leaves (expectations)
Photo: Federica Cicala
Buzz groups

This is a useful method if no ideas are forthcoming in a whole-group discussion. Ask people to discuss the topic in pairs for one or two minutes and then to share their ideas with the rest of the group. You will soon find the atmosphere “buzzing” with conversations and people “buzzing” with ideas!

Newspapers and media

The media are an infallible source of good discussion material. It is always interesting to discuss media content and the way it is presented and to analyse bias and stereotypes. Don’t forget to include materials about young people participating in society and the democratic process (in all kinds of ways)!

Debriefing

Many participatory learning methods allow young people to “experience” a situation from a different perspective, for example, during a role play or World Café activity. These activities should include a debriefing because this leads the group to reflect on how they felt during the activity and therefore helps them to understand its impact on them. They can think about what kind of lesson they can learn from it in relation to themselves, their local community and the global context.

The group or groups should have enough time to finish the activity and step out of the roles they were playing before taking part in a discussion about what happened.

During the debriefing and evaluation these topics should be covered in this order:

- *What happened* during the activity and how participants felt during the process;
- What participants have *learned about themselves*;
- What participants have *learned about the topic* tackled during the activity;
• How participants can use their learning and what they can do in the future in relation to the issue covered.

When planning activities, it is important to leave at least 15 minutes for debriefing (if the group is small; otherwise leave about 30–40 minutes) and to have prepared some guiding questions exploring the above-mentioned dimensions.

Role play

A role play is a short improvised drama acted out by participants. Although people draw on their own life experiences in a role play, it mostly requires them to imagine themselves in an unfamiliar situation. It aims to bring to life circumstances or events which the participants haven’t experienced themselves. Role plays can improve participants’ understanding of a situation and encourage empathy with those who are usually involved in it.

Role plays differ from simulations in that although the latter may also consist of short dramas, these are usually scripted and do not involve the same degree of improvisation. The value of role plays is that they imitate real life. They may raise questions to which there is no simple answer, for example about the right or wrong behaviour of a character. To enable participants to gain greater insights, a useful technique is to ask them to change roles.

There are many added values to using role plays. They:

- Promote young people’s identification with different situations which helps to break down stereotypes
- Promote empathy
- Enable young people to deal with decision making processes and conflict resolution in a safe environment
- Create concrete experiences related to abstract problems
- Help young people to learn how to provide feedback
- Develop competences in terms of knowledge, values and skills over specific issues
- Show how human beings are likely to reproduce social stereotypes even when they are theoretically against them.

Tips for a good role play

Role plays need to be used with sensitivity. Firstly, it is essential that people have time at the end to come out of their role. Secondly, everyone needs to respect the feelings of individuals and the social composition of the group.
Pay attention and provide enough time for the debriefing in order to allow participants to share their feelings, reflect on their actions and create bridges with real life to learn from the “simulated experience”.

Role plays can be great fun for young people, but sometimes they might hurt young people feelings. It’s almost impossible to predict what each person participating has experienced in life, for this reason some sensitivity from the facilitator is required to protect the ones who might be more personally exposed. (For instance, if you organise a role about social inclusion of disabled people there might be someone among the group who is directly or has relatives facing this challenge. It is important to not let these people feel excluded or marginalised).

Simulation

Simulations enable people to experience challenging situations but in a safe environment. They often demand a certain amount of emotional involvement, which makes them a very powerful tool. People learn not only with their heads and hands but also with their hearts.

Different to a role play, simulations usually have a script that young people have to act/perform, which usually show specific critical situations (for instance you might organise a simulation on gender discrimination) to show power relations and feelings between the “oppressor” and the “oppressed”. Afterwards, it can be useful to ask young people participating in the simulation to perform it again proposing a different end, enabling them to solve the conflict and turn the situation around in a positive way.

Debriefing is especially important after a simulation. Participants should discuss their feelings, why they chose to take the actions that they did, any injustices they perceived, and how acceptable they found any resolution that was achieved. They should be helped to draw parallels between what they have experienced and actual situations in the world.

World Café

The World Café method is very useful when you need to gather many ideas on different aspects of an issue in a short period of time. According to the general goal of the session, participants rotate on different tables where specific questions are available in the form of a tablecloth (usually large piece of paper on the tables). Thanks to small group discussions and the notes left from other groups, World Café allows young people to build knowledge and make concrete proposals on relevant issues.

The facilitator’s role is to manage time; letting groups rotate among tables/questions and make sure that groups allow inclusive participation of every person.

At the last round, the facilitator should ask groups to stay on their final table and give them a few minutes to sum-up in bullet points, the main outcomes of the questions.
Finally, each group should then choose a representative to share the results of the table in plenary. The collection of the results can be therefore summarised in a report which will accurately represent the perspective of the whole group on that specific issue / recommendation.

World Café on Gathering recommendations to fight school’s drop-out in Italy. November 2016, Naples. Photo Federica Cicala.

For more ideas, visit the websites below:

- The World Cafe
- World Café Community Foundation: [A quick reference guide for hosting World Café](#)

Open Space Technology

Open Space Technology is a method used to organise sessions/events aiming to generate concrete collective ideas and proposals concerning a specific issue relevant for the community.

The role of the facilitator is to set the topic, provide the space and gather people willing to actively contribute towards the goal. It is, therefore, very important to set the right statement / question to invite people to participate.

OSP can last from 2 hours to 2 days or more and the group can be composed of a minimum of five people up to hundreds.

At the beginning of the session the facilitator explains the rules (see Table 2 below) and creates the agenda together with the participants. Start with a brainstorming session where every person can propose herself/himself to lead a working group on a specific aspect related to the general topic on the OSP. When all the proposals are collected, divide the sessions according to time and spaces available. Several working groups can be organised at the same time.

Participants can freely move into the different working groups and contribute according to their feelings, knowledge and experiences on the issues under discussion.

Each working group should come up with a report on the main outcomes that are shared in plenary at the end of the meeting.
Follow up action can be taken according to the stakeholders the group(s) wish to address.

Table 2

The principles of Open Space Technology

- “Whoever comes is the right people”
- “Whatever happens is the only thing that could have”
- “Whenever it starts is the right time”
- “When it is over, it is over”

Law of Two Feet

This law says that every individual has two feet, and must be prepared to use them. Responsibility for a successful outcome in any Open Space event resides with exactly one person -- each participant. Individuals can make a difference and must make a difference. If that is not true in a given situation, they, and they alone, must take responsibility to use their two feet, and move to a new place where they can make a difference.

Roles of participants

- **Bees** fly from group to group cross-pollinating the discussions.
- **Butterflies** sit around looking relaxed; interesting discussions emerge around them as people find them and pause to chat.

For more ideas, visit the websites below:
- Open Space World
- Wikipedia: Open Space Technology

Future workshops

The aim of Future Workshops is to give young people the opportunity to identify a global issue that causes them concern, and reflect on what they could do about it at a local level. They then propose ideas and policies to their local authorities or other decision-makers. By doing this, they learn to voice their needs and suggestions, participate in the democratic process and become active young European and global citizens.

The Future Workshop methodology allows participants to first critically analyse aspects of the issue in question and then reflect on what they would like their local authority or other decision-makers to do in order to change the situation for the better.

The workshop consists of two four-hour sessions. After these, there is an event that brings the young people and representatives from their local authority, or other decision-makers, together.

**Session 1 (four hours)**

**Context analysis phase (two hours)**

Teacher / Facilitator propose an issue to discuss. This phase is designed to draw out problems, thus stimulating a critical analysis of them.
Participants critically brainstorm the main problems related to the proposed issue. The critical aspects are written up as a numbered list on large flip-chart paper. Afterwards, participants vote for the problem they consider the most important in relation to the issue.

**Proposal phase I (two hours)**

This phase aims to convert the problem into concrete proposals to overcome it that can be developed further.

In practice:

1. Participants turn the problem into proposals (from bad to good). This phase starts with the change from the most voted issue into proposals written as positive statements.
2. The proposals are written up as a numbered list on a flip chart, just as the problems were.
3. Voting. Participants vote for the three, four or five proposals that they consider the most important. The number of proposals chosen depends on how many groups will be formed to work on the development of each proposal. (In a group of approximately 25 participants, this is usually four to five groups.) Participants should be encouraged to come up with real, concrete proposals, about which something which can be done.

**Session 2 (four hours)**

**Proposal phase II (two hours)**

1. Ask young people to form small groups in order to work on the proposal they are most interested in. The groups will develop their chosen proposal following this outline: Why (Why have we chosen this proposal? What’s the issue at hand?), What (What we would like to propose?) and How (How we would like to develop our proposal?). The developed proposals are written up on flip-chart paper or made into a PowerPoint presentation, and are given a catchy title. Participants are encouraged to use the internet during this phase, to research their problem/proposal. They can also decorate their presentation with drawings, cut-outs, photos, etc.

**Feasibility analysis phase (two hours)**

Participants share their proposals to gain feedback from others and to undergo a “feasibility analysis”. This phase aims to demonstrate whether the proposals could be feasibly implemented.

In practice:

1. The proposals, together with a summary of the previous phases, are shared with an initial audience. Participants who are still at school usually do this in front of their head teachers and/or other classes and teachers. The audience give their feedback.
2. Facilitator/teacher invites all teachers to share their experience during the workshop with colleagues, to actively use the online tools to continue exploring global issues with their group/class and other groups/classes.
3. The workshops and the facilitator are evaluated by both students and teachers at the end of each session.
A final event is organised which is aimed at allowing participants to publicly present their proposals to decision-makers. The local authority representatives or other decision-makers, previously briefed about the format of the event, will have the task of responding to the participants and assessing which proposals they are able/willing to implement.

Follow-up of the final workshops will be monitored by participants to continue to be actively engaged as young European and global citizens.

Silent discussion

This method uses writing and silence as tools to help young people explore a topic. Having a written conversation with peers slows down young people’s thinking processes and gives them an opportunity to focus on the views of others. This strategy also creates a visual record of young people’s thoughts and questions that can be referred to at a later stage if necessary.

The activity starts with dividing the class into groups and giving them different stimulus for discussion (for example questions, quotations or historical documents). Every group member has a pen, and each group has a large piece of paper big enough for a written statement or short paragraph with space to add comments. All communication is done in writing without the students talking. After young people have read the question on the paper, they are to comment on that and ask questions to each other by writing on the paper.

Still working in silence, young people leave their group and move to other tables to read the work of others. Young people bring their marker or pen with them and can write comments or further questions for reflection.

The activity ends with each group presenting their work, a group/class discussion and a debriefing.

Digital storytelling

Creating stories with new visual technologies is an activity that has some very positive features. The ritual of sharing insights about life can be valuable, both to those who speak and to those who bear witness. Personal narratives can touch viewers deeply, moving them to reflect on their own experiences, modify their behaviour, treat others with greater compassion, speak out about injustice, and become involved in calling for positive change. This method also shows that forms of, and approaches to, telling stories can be very different.
With this method young people have the chance to reflect on key moments of their life, in order to select one that led them to learning about themselves, in terms of emotions, understanding and changes of perspective.

Once they have identified the moment and the message, they can start drafting the story: in the present tense, with a fast rhythm, full of images, with a description encompassing the five senses and having a straightforward connection to a “key message”, a reality check that leads to a life-lesson learned.

Afterwards, they can develop and improve their digital competences by recording a video in a form of a self-interview to share their story online. If they so wish, they can finalise it with any number of post-production tools.

Storytelling can be integrated into public speeches or into PowerPoint (or similar) presentations. It can be used to deliver messages virally through social media, or can be used to support awareness-raising activities on a wide range of issues.

*There are many simple tools available to use online such as We Video or mobile apps such as Animoto Video Maker.*