

CRITICAL  
CHANGE LAB

Democracy  in  
the  Making:  
Creative Methods  
for Youth  &  
Educators



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## **Democracy in the making ..... 5**

**What this field guide is for ..... 6**

**Democracy and youth agency ..... 7**

**A social justice lens on democracy education ..... 8**

**Getting comfortable with discomfort ..... 9**

**Recognising resistance in all its forms ..... 11**

**Examining the idea of rightful presence ..... 11**

**Building democratic competencies ..... 12**

## **Be prepared, know your terrain ..... 13**

**Firstly, create a safe space. .... 14**

**Secondly, examine your role as a facilitator. .... 16**

**Common facilitation challenges ..... 16**

## **Phases and building blocks for engaging youth in democracy ..... 20**

**Phase 1: Grounding ..... 21**

**Phase 2: Co-constructing Knowledge ..... 24**

**Phase 3: Envisioning ..... 29**

**Phase 4: Putting Into Practice ..... 33**

**Phase 5: Reflecting Together ..... 36**

## **Expect the unexpected ..... 40**

**Embracing chaos and shaping change ..... 41**

**Glossary ..... 43**



## **METHODS**

<b><i>Group Picture to Provoke</i></b> .....	<b>10</b>
<b><i>Walking Debate</i></b> .....	<b>22</b>
<b><i>Shared Code of Conduct</i></b> .....	<b>23</b>
<b><i>Frustration Mapping</i></b> .....	<b>25</b>
<b><i>Photovoice</i></b> .....	<b>26</b>
<b><i>Meme Making</i></b> .....	<b>27</b>
<b><i>Walk of Privilege</i></b> .....	<b>28</b>
<b><i>Historical Roleplay</i></b> .....	<b>30</b>
<b><i>Conflict Storyboard</i></b> .....	<b>31</b>
<b><i>Design Future Social Media Apps</i></b> .....	<b>32</b>
<b><i>Zine Making</i></b> .....	<b>34</b>
<b><i>Theatre of the Oppressed</i></b> .....	<b>35</b>
<b><i>Stop, Start, Continue</i></b> .....	<b>37</b>
<b><i>Dynamic Chain Reflection</i></b> .....	<b>38</b>
<b><i>Reflection and Closing Debate</i></b> .....	<b>39</b>

# Democracy in the making



Democracy is not something that happens only inside a voting booth once every few years – it is a living process. It's the way we talk, disagree, make decisions, listen, and dream together. Democracy is more than a way of governing; it is a way of being. Young people see and experience democracy (or, often, the barriers to engaging in democracy) every day: who gets to speak, who is excluded, and whose voices are most loudly heard. This includes experiences in educational settings, where they see how democratic practices are (or are not) present.

Power systems are present in all of the environments that we move in, including spaces that youth navigate whether formal (like a school system) or non-formal (like a club or team). The way they experience the (often conflicting) systems of power shapes the way they view the world and the agency they feel they have (or do not have) to impact society. That we are living in a time where polarisation, deep political divisions, and declining trust in democracy are spreading fast across Europe further deepens the lack of agency felt by young people.

But what we have found is that there are simple ways to engage young people in everyday democracy – to make them feel heard, to feel agency, and to feel that they can build the futures they want. That is why this field guide exists. It's not a manual full of rules, but a call to action: to play, to be creative, to try things out, to discover together with young people what everyday democracy can be. It is happening right now – in the classroom, on the street, and online.

## What this field guide is for

This guide will contribute to advancing 21<sup>st</sup> century learning among youth, aged 11–18 years, by promoting communication, critical thinking, collaboration, participation, creativity, and reflection to tackle current democratic challenges and ultimately allow young people to envision and work toward the futures they desire. In this first section, we will explore key considerations for working with the topic of democracy with young people, as well as share key phases, building blocks, and methods to use in your formal or non-formal educational environment. Throughout this field guide, real life examples are given from the project Critical ChangeLab.

Our aim with this field guide is not to help you explain voting systems to young people, but to help them engage in situations where they encounter everyday democracy – from deciding what is important to them to working through conflict, from envisioning alternative futures to action. Furthermore, this engagement can take place in all kinds of educational settings.

## Democracy and youth agency

In a simple form, democracy is often described to mean 'rule by the people'. What this generally means for governments is that political leaders are elected by citizens, and every adult citizen is entitled to a vote. Democracy, however, is much more than voting systems. It can be expressed through everyday democracy, where individuals and communities have the right to a voice and have the agency to advocate for and enact change. Everyday democracy can be described as where 'everyone gets to make their opinions heard'; it can look like 'deciding together'; everyone has the right to take part in democratic processes.

When considering democracy, and the role of young people in democratic societies, it is crucial to think about the power structures that are at play in shaping their experiences. As the world keeps changing at a rapid pace, positions of power continue to shift alongside these changes. Therefore, learning about democracy is not a one-time exercise but something that needs to be updated continuously.



In addition, different countries have different democratic traditions and different historical backgrounds. Heavy political polarisation, the level of influence of religion or the organisation of the governmental system, or simply the complexity of knowledge and training needed to best enable educators to engage with young people on the subject of citizenship or civic education also varies across different local contexts. Additionally, how strong is the influence of groups outside of schools? Many governmental and non-governmental organisations, including political foundations and religious groups, contribute to democracy education in young people's lives. Technology, including social media, and developments like AI, further contribute to how young people view and engage in democracy.

Digital tools shape not only the information they encounter but also the pace at which they form opinions and participate in public debate. They create new avenues for expression and mobilisation, while simultaneously exposing young people to misinformation and heightened emotional narratives. As a result, technology plays a central role in how young people understand civic life and imagine their place within it.

## A social justice lens on democracy education

Here's where things get interesting: when we talk about power and democracy with young people, we're not explaining how things work, we're questioning why they work that way in the first place. This is where a social justice-oriented perspective comes in. As Paulo Freire reminds collaborative education 'bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action'.<sup>1</sup>



*Collaborative education bases itself  
on creativity and true reflection.  
(Freire, 1970)*

Think of it like this: there's a difference between equality (everyone gets the same thing), equity (people get what they need based on their starting point), and social justice (we transform the structures that created unequal starting points in the first place). While the first two approaches focus on helping individual learners, the social justice perspective digs deeper. It recognises that schools and educational spaces themselves can actually reproduce the very inequalities we're trying to address.

So, what does this mean for working with young people on democracy? It means we're not just teaching them about power structures; rather, we're inviting them to question, challenge, and reimagine them. This approach encourages both young people and educators to ask: How do systems of power shape what happens in our educational spaces every day? Whose voices are centred, and whose are pushed aside?

The goal is to critically investigate, experience, and challenge existing inequalities through collective inquiry and creative experimentation. In other words, we learn by doing, together. Here's how you can bring this to life:

- **Use your spaces as places of inquiry where young people can examine how privilege, assumptions, or dominant norms show up in their own local contexts. Make it a game of discovery: What patterns do we notice? Who benefits from how things are set up? What assumptions do you (or we) have?**
- **Mix exploring ideas with real situations: How do our own experiences of privilege or marginalisation shape what we think is 'normal' or 'good' in education? What assumptions are we carrying without realising it?**
- **Encourage 'inquiry as stance' - the idea that questioning isn't just something we do once, but a continuous way of looking at the world and our own practice.**

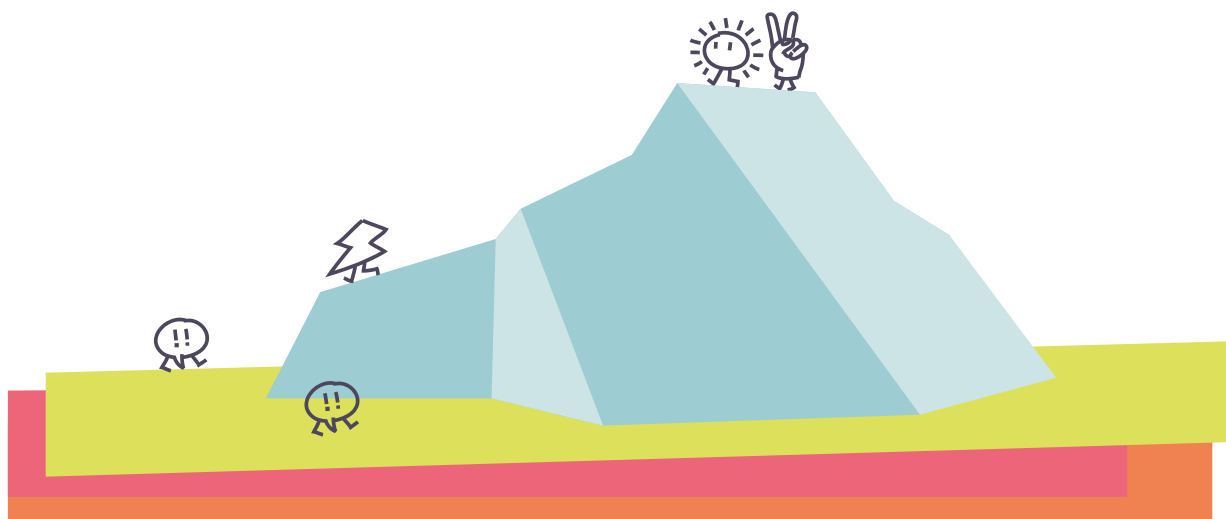
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<sup>1</sup> Freire P. *Pedagogy of the oppressed*. New York: Continuum; 2000. (Original work published 1970)

## Getting comfortable with discomfort

When we start talking about power and inequality, it's going to feel uncomfortable. People might feel guilty, angry, or defensive. And that's okay! In fact, those feelings aren't obstacles, they're actually opportunities for learning. To be comfortable with discomfort, you first need to feel that it's okay to express discomfort. Rather than avoiding the awkwardness, lean into it playfully:

- **Be upfront that discussions about democracy and power might bring up strong feelings. Name it and normalise it.**
- **Design activities that embrace the discomfort - make it part of the exploration rather than something to smooth over. Think of it as productive tension, not something to be feared.**
- **When emotions arise, pause and reflect together: What is this feeling telling us about where we stand in systems of power? What can we learn from this reaction?**
- **Build communities of practice where educators and young people support each other, share perspectives, and learn from people outside traditional educational spaces - activists, artists, community leaders, young people themselves.**
- **Think about how you can end a lesson or session together. Different activities or rituals can be used at this time to help tensions settle and youth to connect with one another.**





## Group Picture to Provoke

*A method that you can use to get young people comfortable with discomfort is Group Picture to Provoke. This activity takes them out of their comfort zones and challenges the norms of educational spaces.*

### LEARNING GOALS:

- Build openness to different beliefs, worldviews, and group dynamics.
- Strengthen critical self-reflection about personal roles within a group.
- Increase awareness of how comfort zones influence participation.
- Encourage reflection on collective decision-making and fairness.

### STEPS:

1. Announce that the group will take a group photo to start the project. Offer no explanation or purpose, allowing the ambiguity to create a sense of mild discomfort. Observe how young people react as they prepare themselves, adjust their appearance, and follow instructions despite uncertainty.
2. After taking the photo, tell young people that the photo will be used publicly. Allow their spontaneous reactions to emerge, including protests or expressions of discomfort. Facilitate a short negotiation in which the young people discuss under what conditions the photo could be used, noting their shift from objection to proposing terms.
3. Ask the group to give the photo a title and encourage them to generate multiple suggestions. Let them propose how to choose the final title collectively, guiding them to reflect on fairness and group decision-making. Support their choice to vote and highlight how this mirrors democratic processes where rules are created together for equal participation.
4. Facilitate a brief debriefing conversation after the activity. Ask the young people what they noticed about their own behaviour – whether they followed instructions automatically, felt pressured, or asserted their boundaries. Invite them to reflect on how group norms, power, and consent shaped the interaction.

## Recognising resistance in all its forms

Resistance isn't just about protest or confrontation. It's any act that disrupts dominant narratives and challenges how things 'have always been done'. Young people are naturally good at this; they just need an enabling environment and tools to explore it. Try these approaches:

- **Invite young people to create counter-narratives through whatever medium excites them – digital stories, performances, art installations, zines, TikToks, exhibitions. Let them challenge dominant perspectives in creative, playful ways.**
- **Ask together: Whose knowledge counts as 'real' knowledge here? What other ways of knowing are we missing?**
- **Co-create projects with local communities, treating their lived experiences as valuable sources of wisdom, not just 'data'.**
- **Design your space so that it feels both safe and challenging.**

## Examining the idea of rightful presence

Rightful presence<sup>2</sup> can be a powerful concept to consider. It goes beyond just including everyone (equity) to actually making visible the lives of those who have been made invisible by how schools and society are structured. Rightful presence is about reauthoring rights, not accepting the rules as given, but co-creatively setting new ones. It involves:

- **Making (in)justice visible in learning: Young people actively explore connections between their own experiences, social structures, and what they're learning. By investigating these intersections together, you create spaces where existing power structures become visible and new possibilities for transformation can emerge. Think of it as collective detective work, or uncovering what's hidden in plain sight.**
- **Collective disruption of traditional power dynamics: This means challenging who holds knowledge and authority in the classroom. Young people and educators work together to redefine rights through shared action. Through collaborative projects, like participatory mapping that exposes systemic inequalities, learning becomes a socio-political practice that challenges existing hierarchies and opens space for collective transformation.**



**The playful part? Young people and educators should be able to co-creatively set the rules or rights in the process of learning together. Democracy isn't just the subject, it's the method.**

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2 Calabrese Barton, A., & Tan, E. (2020). Beyond equity as inclusion: A framework of "rightful presence" for guiding justice-oriented studies in teaching and learning. *Educational researcher*, 49(6), 433-440.  
Calabrese Barton, A., & Tan, E. (2019). Designing for rightful presence in STEM: The role of making present practices. *Journal of the Learning Sciences*, 28(4-5), 616-658.

## Building democratic competencies



*As Lawy and Biesta say,  
‘the purpose of democracy education is to educate children and young people to become members of a democratic society through fostering democratic attitudes and providing necessary skills and knowledge for engaging in political participation and voting’  
(Lawy & Biesta, 2006).<sup>3</sup>*

You want to motivate young people to bring about change. To do this, you need a strategy and can use different building blocks and methods, described later in the section ‘Phases and building blocks for engaging youth in democracy’.

You need to prepare and plan; this is part of the process. We’ve identified some key competencies and skills to keep in mind when you’re planning. You may want to focus on some or all of these, but they all contribute to helping young people understand and do democracy in their own lives. The aim of using these phases, blocks, and methods is to help young people gain competencies in:

- 1. Critical Understanding of the World – interpreting social, cultural, and historical contexts; recognizing contradictions, structures, and power relations; using evidence to understand phenomena.**
- 2. Creative and Imaginative Competences – questioning assumptions through imagination; exploring “what if?” possibilities; envisioning alternative futures.**
- 3. Transformative Agency – turning ideas into action; setting shared goals and planning change; engaging in collaborative transformation.**
- 4. Democratic Disposition – applying democratic values; engaging with diverse perspectives; contributing to inclusive decision-making.**

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<sup>3</sup> Lawy R. And Biesta G. Citizenship–as–Practice: The Educational Implications of an Inclusive and Relational Understanding of Citizenship. Milton Park: British Journal of Educational Studies 54; 2006.

# Be prepared, know your terrain

Preparing for engaging  
young people in democratic  
education



To (re)activate the relationship between youth and democracy and consequently the future of European democracy, it is essential to first understand the democratic awareness among the young people you are engaging. Once the level of awareness is established using different creative methods and tools, you can start to deepen this understanding. This critical understanding is essential to move young people toward the goal of this field guide: active citizenship. When engaging young people in democratic activities and processes, it is imperative that you consider two elements – creating a safe space and examining your role as a facilitator.

## **Firstly, create a safe space.**

Democracy cannot exist without trust. Bring warmth, time, and space to breathe. Creating a safe space, whether in a classroom or any other learning setting, helps build an environment where young people feel respected, supported, and valued. When young people feel safe, they're more confident, able to better manage their emotions, and are often more open to participating, sharing ideas, and taking risks. Safe spaces also offer important support, especially for marginalised groups, giving them a break from judgment and a place to build resilience.

Start small when creating a safe space; consider using activities like a circle conversation, a check-in with emoji cards, or a short walk without phones. To help you understand how to create a safe space, we've included two real life examples of how this has worked with young people in practice. While creating a safe space is one of the building blocks of the Grounding phase, described later in the guide, it is such a critical element to discussing democracy in educational spaces; if this is not taken into consideration, it is unlikely that activities will have meaningful impact.

## What we learned

One of the methods we used with youth was a Hopes & Fears activity at the start of the week. The youth were all coming from different schools so the first morning was really about getting them to feel comfortable, and one way to do this was by asking them all to write their hopes and fears on post its. We then collected these and stuck them on a whiteboard to reflect on. Most people were worried about not being able to think of ideas or not making friends. Getting this all out in the open in an anonymous way helped to create a safe space for them to settle into. — TRINITY COLLEGE DUBLIN



Hopes & Fears. Photo: Trinity College Dublin

## What we learned

We facilitated a Positioning Through Presence activity to help young people explore identity, belonging, and social positioning through physical movement and storytelling. Participants positioned themselves in the room based on statements reflecting personal experiences and beliefs (such as 'I have siblings,' 'I feel comfortable sharing my opinion in the group,' or 'I see my future positively'). For each statement, those who identified with it gathered together while a photo captured the visible diversity within the group. Afterward, we held a discussion where young people shared how it felt to belong - or not belong - to certain categories, connecting these personal experiences to broader themes of inclusion and social dynamics. Using this pedagogy of discomfort, we created a safe space where young people could develop empathy, build trust, and gain critical awareness of their own and others' positions within both the classroom, community, and society at large. — WAAG FUTURELAB



Positioning Through Presence. Photo: Waag Futurelab

## Secondly, examine your role as a facilitator.

As a facilitator, you are not the all-knowing leader. You are a guide, a mirror, and sometimes a troublemaker who asks questions. Let young people feel that their input matters. Pay attention not only to those who speak, but also to those who remain silent. Ask: who makes decisions here? Who feels heard? What power dynamics are at play, including those between the facilitator(s) and young people?

And don't forget reflection. Democracy is learned through doing, but also by pausing. In every moment there may be a question: What just happened? How did the space feel? How did the activity feel? There is a big difference between evaluation and reflection. Reflection is never right or wrong; everyone has their own way to give words to an experience. Meta-reflection is also key to the practices one puts into practice as an educator; think about to what extent you are exercising power within the educational space.

These moments of reflection often reveal that the work is complex, layered, and sometimes uncertain – and that is part of the practice. The path to engaging with young people about democracy is never a straight path. Along the way you might feel lost. We have a few tips and tricks in how to get back on the right path if you encounter common challenges.

## Common facilitation challenges



### Challenge #1 – Disconnection from democracy

The general understanding of democracy is reduced to a basic definition: democracy = voting and/or democracy = government. Democracy is an abstract and distant concept that young people do not think they experience in their daily life. The moments where democracy is included in their daily lives is when it is associated with group tasks within a school context.

#### TIPS:

- Thinking about change is meaningful when it is situated and close to the youth – co-determine a topic with youth at the beginning of your programme (as detailed later in the guide in the section on Onboarding)
- Involve youth in investigation (observation, interviews to connect with the topic, etc.)
- Add guided reflective moments with the young people and use them to reflect on and discuss how they are doing democracy in the programme



## **Challenge #2 – Feeling of powerlessness or lack of agency**

There is an overall sense of powerlessness as many young people feel that their participation doesn't matter, fearing that 1) their voice has no impact and 2) the scale of 'problem' is too large.

### **TIPS:**

- Use different temporalities to understand an issue – for example, link it to the past, present and future of an issue and the consequences linked to it
- Encourage systemic thinking
- Make abstract concepts concrete, connecting them to realities and communities outside of educational contexts
- Facilitate the envisioning of alternative systems and futures
- Do not rush – take the time to work through the process



## **Challenge #3 – Struggles with decision-making**

There might be instances when young people feel reluctant to engage in taking decisions on a project – whether it is because they are afraid, that they will be held responsible if the decision turns out to be wrong, or that they think their decision is not important.

### **TIPS:**

- Provide guidance to move from abstract concepts to creative outputs
- Scaffold their decision-making process – use creative or playful methods to work towards a decision and foster confidence
- If young people are hesitant to make decisions, share with them that the decision will then be made for them (instead of by them)
- When providing guidance on decision making, use examples or solutions that are based on either current affairs or a situation that is well known in their neighbourhood – present day examples that they can relate to rather than vague ideas that could happen in the future



## Challenge #4 - Scale of issues

When discussing societal issues, problems may arise that impact society at large, not just for individuals. Young people might disconnect due to the scale of the issue.

### TIPS:

- Make sure you connect large societal issues to their situated and personal experiences
- Use tools and strategies to help frame reflection such as competency charts and structured debates
- Use hopeful narratives instead of 'doom and gloom' scenarios. Fear-based messages about the future are not motivating and not relevant to the present of the young people.

### What we learned

*A method that helped us pivot during our lab was Dear Data; it was so effective that we have used it multiple times with youth. The objective of the method is to gather personal, everyday experiences related to a chosen eco-social issue that needs to be addressed and then present it in a visual pattern through graphic or abstract representation. We worked with young people on different topics, and the method is flexible enough to accommodate this. The Dear Data method helped to ground the issues that can at times feel too large or abstract, in the participants' everyday immediate experience. — UNIVERSITY OF BARCELONA*



Dear Data. Photo: Raquel F. Couto.

## Challenge #5 – Disagreement or conflict

It's natural for some disagreement or conflict to arise when working with youth, whether between participants or between youth and facilitators. The important thing is to approach these moments with care and reflection. After all, democracy itself is rarely linear or straightforward. Working democratically necessarily involves navigating difference, tension, and conflict; this requires the need for collaboration and considerations of equity.

### TIPS:

- Do not try to avoid conflict – working through conflict and disagreement is an important democratic skill for youth to learn
- Let youth decide how they want to work through the conflict; allow them to propose solutions and ideas and resist the urge to interfere unless the situation is becoming unsafe
- Creating a code of conduct with youth at the start of your work can allow them to think through how they want to navigate conflict before it arises

### What we learned

*In a situation where a group of four young people faced disagreement, a key facilitation strategy that we used was a combination of active listening, practical guidance, and giving the young people space to navigate their own process. We acknowledged their concerns, offered suggestions for collaboration, and then stepped back to let them experiment with alternative ways of working. This approach ensured that they felt supported while remaining proactive, ultimately enabling them to address internal conflicts constructively and develop their own solutions without imposing outcomes.*

– UNIVERSITY OF OULU



**Active Listening.** Photo: University of Oulu

# Phases and building blocks for engaging youth in democracy



When questions of democracy come up in your youth space or classroom, think of this guide as a path built from phases and practical building blocks that you can use to engage young people. While each phase has a distinct name, they reinforce each other and often overlap; at times, you might consider re-visiting elements of a phase to best engage young people. The five phases are:

- **Grounding**
- **Co-constructing Knowledge**
- **Envisioning**
- **Putting Into Practice**
- **Reflecting Together**

Within each phase is a set of building blocks – key elements and moments that help you construct, create, and imagine together with young people. You can shuffle, combine, jump backwards or forwards using building blocks – but they are all important blocks in helping engage youth with everyday democracy. Sometimes you use the blocks to metaphorically build a tower, sometimes a new village, and sometimes you knock it over on purpose. The process matters more than the end product or result. It is also important to stay flexible when working with these blocks – the planned structure does not need to be entirely determined before you start, and it is important for the facilitator to use the blocks flexibly based on young peoples’ needs and wants.

In this chapter, each phase and its corresponding building blocks will be described, as well as related methods you might consider using in your educational space.

## **Phase 1: Grounding**

This phase is critical to successfully engaging young people around everyday democracy. It is helpful both when youth don’t know each other as well as to ‘reset’ an existing group, allowing for new perspectives and opinions to emerge. This phase also allows for the various power structures present in the group to emerge so that they can be acknowledged and examined. The aim of this block is to establish a collective foundation for inquiry together in the next blocks.

It is important that this phase be the first you use in your engagement with youth. This phase helps everyone feel grounded and connected from the start. It’s about building trust, setting expectations, and creating a shared sense of purpose before diving into deeper inquiry. Building blocks in this phase are:

## Introduce

Begin by helping participants see who's gathered and why. Create space for everyone to share their motivations, interests, and hopes for being part of the process. Be transparent about your own facilitation goals so it feels like an open exchange rather than a top-down setup.



### Walking Debate

*Participants physically position themselves along an agree–disagree spectrum in response to statements about youth agency and democracy.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- *Reflect on personal viewpoints and how they compare with others.*
- *Strengthen confidence in publicly expressing a stance.*
- *Practice democratic deliberation through movement and dialogue.*
- *Build awareness of the diversity of perspectives within a group.*

#### STEPS:

1. *Before the session: Make a list of statements for young people to reflect on. Include some 'easier' questions ('I prefer chocolate over vanilla ice cream') before moving to more nuanced questions ('I feel I have the ability to make change in my community').*
2. *Begin by marking two clear areas in the room labelled 'agree' and 'disagree.' Explain that participants will move according to their stance on each statement, emphasising that there are no right or wrong answers.*
3. *Read the first statement aloud and give participants a moment to reflect before they move. Assure them that staying in the middle is also acceptable if they feel unsure. Remind them that shifting positions later is encouraged if their perspective changes.*
4. *Invite a few volunteers from different positions to share why they chose their stance. Model active listening and keep contributions concise so the activity maintains momentum.*
5. *Repeat the process with additional statements. Make sure the atmosphere stays respectful and that all movement choices are validated.*
6. *Close with a short group reflection on how perspectives differed or shifted. Ask what surprised them or what they learned from seeing the group spread out in physical space. Connect the experience to broader themes of dialogue and democratic participation.*

## Co-create a safe space

This building block is all about setting the tone together. Instead of rules defined by adults, everyone helps decide what makes the space feel welcoming, respectful, and safe. It's a mix of honest discussion, shared values, and clear agreements about how we want to show up for each other. By naming what matters and agreeing on how we'll handle things if they get tricky, we create a space that feels supportive, open, and safe.



### Shared Code of Conduct

*Participants reflect on and share personal values for collaboration, then collectively agree on a shared code of conduct outlining several core principles to guide their group work.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- Identify values and expectations needed for respectful collaboration.
- Build shared guidelines for working effectively as a group.
- Deepen self-reflection and understanding of others' needs.
- Strengthen openness to different beliefs and working styles.

#### STEPS:

1. Ask each participant to reflect individually on 1–3 principles they find important when working with others. Provide post-its and encourage contributions about both interpersonal behaviour (e.g., listening) and practical habits (e.g., punctuality). Remind them that these principles should support comfort, respect, and productivity.
2. Invite small groups to share their individual ideas and discuss why each principle matters. Encourage them to cluster similar concepts and notice emerging themes. Make sure every participant has an opportunity to speak.
3. Guide the groups in choosing 1–5 core principles they agree to uphold together. Ask them to rephrase these principles in clear, positive language that everyone understands. Support them in negotiating differences and finding common ground.
4. Have each group document their shared guidelines in a written format. This might be a shared online document or a poster visible in the room. Emphasise that the guidelines can be revisited and adapted as the group evolves.
5. Invite a brief whole-group reflection on how these codes of conduct can support the collective work. Ask participants to share which principles feel especially important to them. Reinforce the idea that shared agreements strengthen trust and cooperation.

## Phase 2: Co-constructing Knowledge

Throughout this guide, we talk about focusing on a particular topic; this is the phase in which you co-define this topic with youth. Start with the lived experiences of young people. Ask what matters to them and what causes friction in their everyday lives. Sometimes the topic comes from the facilitator – climate, fake news, inequality – and young people can further sharpen or home in on a specific aspect of the topic. Sometimes it is chosen together between the facilitator and young people; sometimes the youth choose it themselves. What matters is that young people can recognise themselves in the problem. Your aim here is to collectively define, question, and analyse your topic.

Knowledge here is not a pile of facts. It is a web of stories, emotions, and images. Invite young people to share experiences in a ‘story circle.’ Use games or art to make power visible: a privilege walk, or a collage of news cut-outs that are remixed into new meanings. What emerges is a collective picture of reality: messy, multi-voiced, full of contradictions. Exactly like democracy itself.

This phase is about exploring a topic together– questioning, analysing, and uncovering deeper meanings as a group. The aim is to help participants think critically while connecting ideas to their own experiences. Building blocks in this phase are:



## Co-define the topic

Collectively shape the focus of the lab, deciding together what's worth exploring and why. It's a moment to bring everyone's perspectives into the mix and build ownership over the topic.



### **Frustration Mapping**

*Participants use an online tool that produces word clouds to share everyday frustrations and future visions, generating a word cloud that facilitators analyse to identify common themes and guide subsequent activities.*

#### **LEARNING GOALS:**

- Surface everyday concerns and future hopes in an open, spontaneous way.
- Affirm participants' lived experiences as valuable contributions.
- Create a shared starting point for deeper reflection.
- Strengthen critical awareness of social and personal challenges.

#### **STEPS:**

1. Introduce an online tool that collects responses and explain that participants will contribute anonymously. Demonstrate how to access the platform and submit entries.
2. Present two guiding questions: 'What bothers you in your everyday life?' and 'How do you envision the future?'. Ask participants to submit as many responses as they'd like. Encourage honesty and openness without worrying about perfect wording.
3. Display the live-generated word cloud or list of responses. Invite participants to notice patterns, recurring themes, or surprising entries. Keep the atmosphere non-judgmental so participants feel comfortable reacting authentically.
4. Facilitate a discussion to interpret the emerging themes. Ask what stands out and what resonates across the group. Use their contributions to make intentional links to upcoming activities.
5. Close by summarising the themes that emerged and how they will shape the next steps. Highlight that their input forms the foundation for future work.

## Ground in personal experiences

After deciding on the topic, connect the larger issue to the youth's lived experiences. How does the larger, and perhaps more abstract, topic connect to the daily lives of young people?



### Photovoice

*Youth capture and discuss images that illustrate their chosen topic, fostering critical reflection, empathy, and dialogue.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- Use images to analyse social issues and inequalities.
- Build empathy by sharing personal perspectives.
- Strengthen creative and critical interpretation skills.

#### STEPS:

1. Introduce the Photovoice activity and ask young people to collect photos that represent the chosen topic. Emphasise that photos may be personal, symbolic, or observational. Clarify ethical considerations such as consent and privacy if people are pictured. Allow young people to opt out, or chose a photo found online that represents the topic, if they are uncomfortable bringing a personal photo.
2. Ask young people to submit their photos for printing onto a single sheet for each participant. Encourage them to select images that reflect different aspects of the topic - objects, people, spaces, routines. Prepare all printed sheets before the discussion begins.
3. Form small groups and distribute the photo sheets. Invite each youth to explain the stories behind their image, including why they chose it and what it represents. Encourage peers to ask questions.
4. Guide groups to discuss broader themes that connect the photos. Help young people make links between individual experiences and societal change.
5. Close with a brief reflection on what young people learned by viewing others' photos. Ask what surprised them or challenged their assumptions.

## Explore multiple perspectives

Bring in fresh voices, new data, or outside experiences to widen the group's understanding. This can mean inviting a guest speaker, taking a field trip, or experimenting with creative media. The idea is to open up the conversation beyond the room.



### Meme Making

*Young people work in groups to create satirical memes about local issues they wish to address to politicians/educators/stakeholders, using humour and creativity to express their concerns and advocate for change.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- Use humour and creativity to communicate concerns related to the chosen topic.
- Strengthen digital media literacy through a familiar format.
- Collaborate on message design and local issue identification.
- Develop concise communication skills suited for youth audiences.

#### STEPS:

1. Divide young people into small groups (of no more than 5) and assign each group a workspace. Explain that they will create memes about issues. Encourage them to think broadly about what 'local' might mean - home, school, neighbourhood, or region.
2. Ask groups to discuss concerns about the chosen topic that affect them directly. Encourage them to focus on one specific message or theme. Support them in exploring satirical or humorous angles that make their message more impactful.
3. Show young people how to use an online meme generator and provide a link to a free template site. Demonstrate simple tools like text placement and image selection. Remind them that clarity matters more than artistic perfection.
4. Give groups time to create several drafts before choosing their final meme. Offer feedback on readability, tone, and message clarity. Encourage them to avoid memes that target people rather than issues.
5. Ask groups to upload their memes to a shared space, like on Padlet, and view one another's work. Facilitate a short conversation about what makes some memes effective or memorable.

## Analyse power structures and how they shape society

Guide participants to look at the deeper structures shaping their topic – root causes, power dynamics, and systemic issues. This block helps connect personal experiences to broader patterns, promoting both awareness and agency.



### Walk of Privilege

*Youth assume different social identities and respond to statements by moving forward or backward to visualise how privilege and disadvantage shape opportunities, followed by group reflection on inequality and social perspectives.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- Build awareness of how social identities shape opportunities.
- Encourage empathy for experiences different from one's own.
- Strengthen critical reflection on privilege and inequality.
- Promote conversation about structural forces affecting life outcomes.

#### STEPS:

1. Provide each participant with a role card representing a specific identity or social position. Ask them to read it privately and think about what everyday life might be like for that person. Offer the option to exchange cards or opt out if they feel uncomfortable.
2. Give participants a few minutes to inhabit their character's perspective. Encourage them to imagine factors such as safety, mobility, access to activities, and social acceptance. Emphasise that the goal is empathetic understanding, not acting.
3. Ask all participants (except observers) to stand in a straight line. Read each privilege-related statement aloud and instruct participants to step forward, backward, or stay put according to what their character would experience. Reinforce that movement is silent and reflective.
4. Have two young people serve as observers who watch how participants move. They should note which statements create the largest shifts and how people respond physically. Observers prepare brief comments for the debrief.
5. After the final statement, facilitate a discussion about the visible distribution of privilege in the room. Invite participants to guess the identities represented and consider what surprised them. Connect these insights to broader issues of inequality and social justice.

## Phase 3: Envisioning

Imagine that everything could be different. What could democracy look like in 2040? What if young people could set the rules in your neighbourhood? In this phase, don't rush into practicality. Leave space for wild ideas and impossible dreams. Ask participants to make a newspaper from the future, build an artifact that seems to come from another time, or draw their hopes in silence. Your aim here is to imagine alternative futures – imagination is a key element in making change possible.

Sometimes visions remain tied to what is already known. Sometimes the future feels too far away. That's fine. Use this discomfort as an opportunity: show how imagination is shaped by the limits of our culture, and practice breaking those boundaries. You can also use the past, or historical examples, as a starting point to ground young people in reality – what has happened in the past, what is happening now, and what they can envision moving forward. This phase invites participants to imagine alternatives and possible futures. It's about stretching the imagination while keeping one foot in real-world possibilities. Building blocks in this phase are:



## Connect past(s), present(s), and future(s)

Ask participants to step into different roles connected to the issue; this could mean imagining themselves as policymakers, activists, community members, people of the past, or even future generations. By shifting roles, they'll uncover new tensions and creative solutions.



### Historical Roleplay

*Participants embody historical characters to explore differing perspectives on social issues, using roleplay and reflection to understand complexity and connect past contexts to present challenges.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- Understand historical perspectives through embodied experience.
- Develop empathy for people living in different eras.
- Strengthen creative thinking and improvisation.
- Use roleplay to explore social issues.

#### STEPS:

1. Begin with a physical warm-up to help participants transition into roleplay. Invite them to close their eyes and notice their posture and physical presence. Suggest imagining how their character might stand, move, or breathe.
2. Read aloud the historical context and outline the scenario they will explore (chosen beforehand by the facilitator). Explain the rules of roleplay, including respect, listening, and staying in character.
3. Distribute character cards and give participants time to internalise their roles. Invite them to identify a physical gesture or trait that helps them embody the character. Ask them to leave and re-enter the room fully in character.
4. Set the opening scene and encourage characters to introduce themselves using prompts or situation cues. Let conversations unfold naturally as participants explore their roles. Support shy young people by offering sentence starters or structured interactions.
5. Introduce central dilemmas related to the chosen topic in the imagined city. Encourage characters to respond according to their roles' goals, motivations, and constraints. Allow stories to develop organically through interaction.
6. End with a structured reflection outside of character. Ask participants what perspectives they encountered and what surprised them. Connect insights from the historical scenario to contemporary issues in society.

## Craft critical speculations

Encourage the group to map out the current reality: what's working, what's not, and what constraints exist. This helps ground the imagination in an informed picture of the present before jumping into future-thinking.



### Conflict Storyboard

*Youth select a form of systemic oppression related to the chosen topic, then create visual storyboards depicting fictional conflict scenarios to critically analyse power dynamics and explore transformative alternatives.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- Analyse systemic inequities through fictional narratives.
- Build collaborative decision-making and scene development skills.
- Strengthen empathy and conflict-resolution thinking.
- Use visual storytelling to explore power dynamics and alternatives.

#### STEPS:

1. Present several subtopics related to injustice in society (related to the overall chosen topic) and give examples for each. Encourage young people to choose a subtopic that resonates with them or their experiences. Form groups based on topic interest.
2. Ask each group to imagine a fictional scene that illustrates a conflict within their chosen topic. Encourage them to think about characters, motivations, and the setting. Support creative but thoughtful approaches that highlight inequity.
3. Provide blank paper for drawing the storyboard and explain what a storyboard is. Ask groups to plan their story in two or three key scenes that show the progression of conflict. Remind them that simple drawings are perfectly fine.
4. Invite groups to sketch their scenes and discuss the emotions, power imbalances, or injustices they want to highlight. Offer guiding questions to help them deepen their narrative. Encourage them to think about possible resolutions or transformations.
5. Facilitate a brief sharing round where groups present their storyboards. Ask what message they hope viewers will take away. Highlight the variety of ways young people identified and represented injustice.

## Imagine alternatives

Invite participants to dream big. Ask 'what if' questions that open the door to creative, even radical, possibilities. This is the moment to imagine futures that challenge the status quo and reflect shared values.



### **Design Future Social Media Apps**

*Youth envision and design future social media apps with features that prevent democracy challenges such as bullying and racism, creating logos and visual layouts to illustrate their speculative solutions and sharing them through collaborative presentation and discussion.*

#### **LEARNING GOALS:**

- *Develop imagination and speculative thinking.*
- *Envision tools that reduce youth concerns about social media, like racism, misinformation, and bullying online.*
- *Strengthen visual communication and beginner design skills.*
- *Build creative agency by proposing future-oriented solutions.*

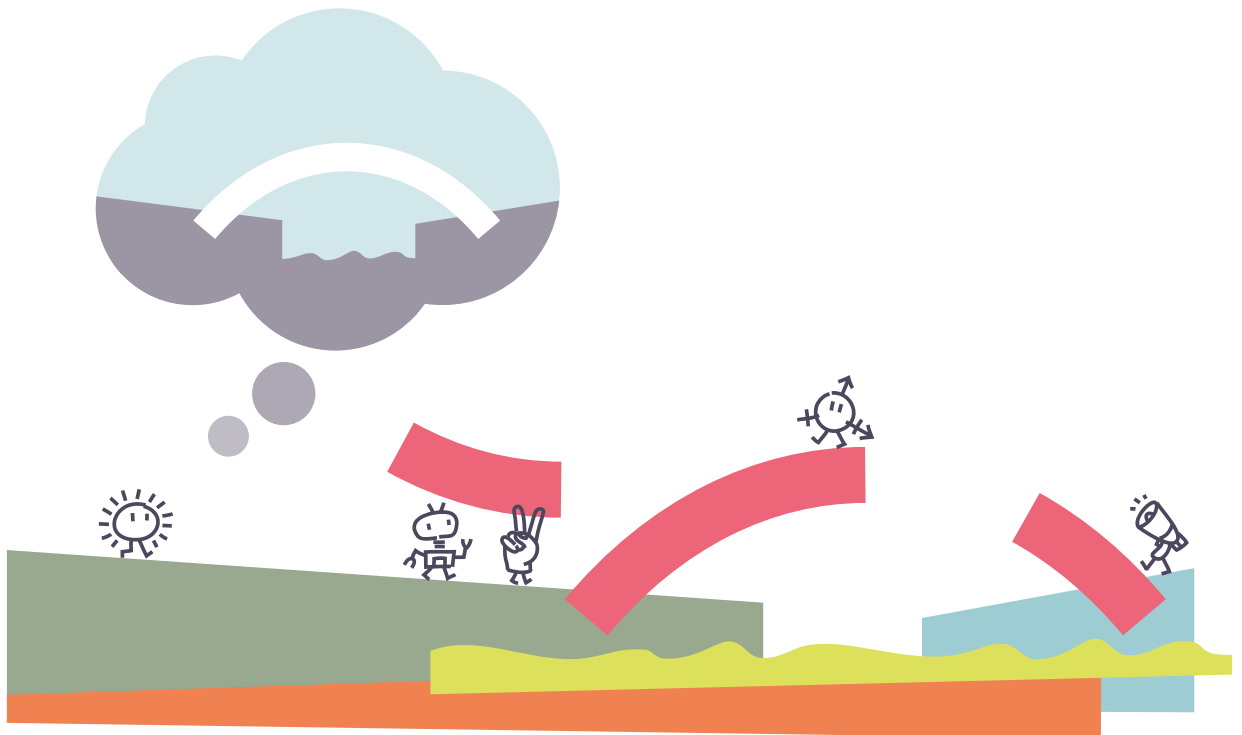
#### **STEPS:**

1. *Introduce the challenge: designing a future social media app or feature that prevents bullying and racism. Encourage ambitious, creative ideas unconstrained by current technology. Explain that each group will present their concept at the end. You can also invite external stakeholders (like government representatives, cultural centres, etc.), to attend the presentations.*
2. *Ask groups to brainstorm what their app or feature does and who it helps. Invite them to describe the problem it solves and the unique approach it takes. Support groups in keeping the idea simple but meaningful.*
3. *Guide young people in designing a logo for their app. Encourage them to choose symbols or imagery that reflect the feature's purpose. Remind them that logos can be simple sketches.*
4. *Have groups create a visual layout showing where the feature appears on a phone screen. Ask them to sketch one to three screens illustrating how the user interacts with the feature. Encourage clarity and readability over complexity.*
5. *Allow each group to present their app to the larger group (or even to stakeholders outside the educational space) and answer questions. Prompt the other young people to ask constructive questions about the app's purpose or functionality. Highlight the creativity and problem-solving demonstrated across the room.*

## Phase 4: Putting Into Practice

This phase takes dreaming into action. But be careful: action does not always mean producing a final product. Democracy is not a race toward results. It is about practicing, experimenting, and making things visible. An action can be small: posters with self-made slogans, an open mic at the schoolyard, or a conversation with the principal. It can also be larger: presenting a prototype to the city council or starting a social media campaign.

What matters most is that young people feel agency: we can make a difference, however small. Let them decide what 'action' means and recognise that sometimes the process is more valuable than the product. This phase turns ideas into action. Participants start testing, prototyping, and sharing interventions that bring their visions to life. Building blocks in this phase are:



## Design and prototype

Encourage small-scale experiments (artworks, prototypes, campaigns) that test out new ideas in practice. The emphasis is on learning through doing and reflecting on what works (and what doesn't).



### Zine Making

*Youth create a zine (a self-made publication, generally made on paper) on their selected topic, developing creative content with proposals and actions for change through text and visuals.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- Use creative media to express ideas about their selected topic.
- Explore issues from multiple perspectives and roles.
- Strengthen research, communication, and design skills.
- Develop imagination in proposing actionable improvements.

#### STEPS:

1. Introduce the concept of a zine as an informal publication for sharing ideas. Explain that participants can work alone, in pairs, or in small groups.
2. Ask participants to brainstorm what messages, stories, or proposals they want to include. Encourage them to mix formats (text, drawings, collage, slogans, or interviews). Support groups in sketching a rough layout before they begin.
3. Provide all necessary materials and give participants time to create their zines. Encourage creative experimentation while reminding them to keep their message clear. Circulate to answer questions and help shape ideas.
4. Invite participants or groups to present their zines and explain their messages. Ask what they hope their audience will understand or feel. Encourage respectful discussion about shared themes or unique insights.
5. Finish by discussing how the zines might be distributed or used. Suggest sharing them within the school, community, or digitally.

## Share and discuss publicly

Support participants in presenting their ideas to others. Whether through a pitch, performance, or presentation, this step helps them articulate what they've learned and invite feedback from diverse audiences.



## Theatre of the Oppressed

*Youth participate in a role-play which dramatises a real-world injustice, then repeatedly re-stage the scene while audience members intervene with realistic strategies to explore how collective action can disrupt oppressive dynamics.*

### LEARNING GOALS:

- Strengthen critical understanding of real-world power structures and systemic inequities.
- Develop democratic competences through collective analysis, dialogue, and problem solving.
- Deepen awareness of multiple perspectives by embodying different roles within oppressive situations.
- Build agency by experimenting with realistic strategies for confronting injustice.

### STEPS:

1. Begin by asking the young people to reflect on the activities so far. Invite them to choose one systemic conflict (like racism, sexism, or ableism) that they want to dramatise. Encourage them to keep the situation grounded in real experiences or observations so the scene reflects recognizable power dynamics.
2. Have the young people perform a short scene in which a protagonist faces oppression but is unable to resolve the situation. Explain that this first version is intended to show how power works and why the protagonist fails. Encourage them to pay attention to emotions, tension, and the structural forces shaping the interaction.
3. Repeat the scene, but this time invite audience members to intervene. Explain that anyone may step into the protagonist's role and try out a realistic, non-magical strategy to change the outcome. Encourage attempts that are practical and plausible, highlighting how small shifts in behaviour or language can create different possibilities.
4. Pause after each intervention and guide a discussion about what happened. Ask what the intervening young person attempted, why it may or may not have worked, and what structural constraints still limited change. If needed, replay the scene so the young people can test alternative approaches or refine earlier attempts.
5. Conclude with a whole-group reflection on the strategies explored. Ask the young people which actions seemed most effective, which were limited, and why. Encourage them to consider how the insights gained from the activity might apply to real-life moments when they witness or experience injustice.

## Phase 5: Reflecting Together

Take time to pause. What did we do? What did we feel? What has changed, even a little? Your goal here is to reflect collectively and iteratively. Reflection does not need to be a boring evaluation session. It can be playful and creative: organise a talk, record a podcast, or draw a conflict map.

It is not about ticking off successes or failures but about learning together. It's also about making contradictions visible. Democracy is about practising disagreement, negotiating differences, and learning to stay with discomfort. Consider also how you might embed reflection and evaluation throughout the process. While 'Reflecting Together' is the last phase, continuous reflection throughout the phases is ideal instead of simply adding it on at the end.

This phase invites participants to reflect on what they've learned, how they've worked together, and where they want to go next. Reflection is both ongoing and collective; it's about noticing growth, celebrating effort, and planning forward. Building blocks in this phase are:



## Keep reviewing

Build in moments of reflection throughout the process, not just at the end. Encourage open feedback loops where participants can express what's working, what's confusing, or what could improve.



### Stop, Start, Continue

*Youth reflect on and share what they would like to stop, continue, or add to the programme. This can be weaved throughout the activities as a way to adapt and pivot to youth needs and wishes.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- Foster youth participation in shaping the program.
- Strengthen reflective thinking and constructive feedback.
- Build group decision-making skills.
- Enable actionable improvements to the learning experience.

#### STEPS:

1. Draw three sections labelled 'Stop,' 'Start,' and 'Continue' on a board or flipchart. Explain what each category represents and invite young people to think critically about the programme so far. Provide post-its and encourage honest contributions.
2. Give young people time to write down suggestions and place them on the board. Encourage specificity rather than vague statements. Ensure young people have space to contribute individually and without pressure.
3. Read through the suggestions with the group and facilitate discussion. Highlight patterns and areas of consensus. Identify which changes can be implemented immediately and which may require more planning.
4. Ask young people to reflect on the process of giving feedback. Encourage them to notice the value of listening and shared decision-making. Reinforce that their input directly shapes future sessions.
5. Summarise the agreed next steps and thank young people for their contributions. Clarify how their suggestions will be integrated moving forward. Emphasise the importance of ongoing dialogue and shared ownership.

## Assess learnings together

End with a collective reflection that helps participants synthesise their learning, identify impacts, and envision how to carry insights forward. Let it be visual, conversational, and collaborative.



### Dynamic Chain Reflection

*Participants write reflective statements about their experience on paper and pass them around, with each person adding to the chain by either agreeing ('Yes, and...') or offering a contrasting perspective ('But...'), creating a collaborative and dynamic reflection process.*

#### LEARNING GOALS:

- Support collaborative reflection through cumulative writing.
- Practice responsive dialogue using 'Yes, and...' or 'But...'
- Strengthen creativity and active listening.
- Build democratic habits of shared meaning-making.

#### STEPS:

1. Provide each participant with a blank sheet of paper and a guiding reflection question. Ask them to write one sentence about their experience of the session or process.
2. Ask participants to pass their paper to the person next to them. The next participant responds by beginning with 'Yes, and...' to build on the statement, or 'But...' to introduce a contrasting perspective. Repeat the passing several times so each paper collects multiple viewpoints.
3. After several rounds, return papers to their original authors. Invite participants to read the full chain of statements, noticing shifts in thinking or tone. Give them time to reflect silently before sharing.
4. Facilitate a group discussion about the experience of building a reflective chain. Ask what they learned from seeing multiple perspectives layered together. Highlight how dialogue evolves when contributions are connected rather than isolated.
5. Close by asking participants to identify one insight from the activity they will carry forward. Reinforce the value of collaborative reflection in group learning. Encourage them to use similar approaches in future discussions.

## Decide what's next

Work together with youth to decide next steps. These can be big or small, ranging from individual commitment to discussing ideas with their peers to presenting their ideas to government organisations. What's next could also include more sessions to keep the discussion moving forward.



### Reflection and Closing Debate

*Participants gather as a large group to reflect on the entire experience, sharing what they learned, identifying strengths and challenges, and offering constructive feedback and suggestions for next steps.*

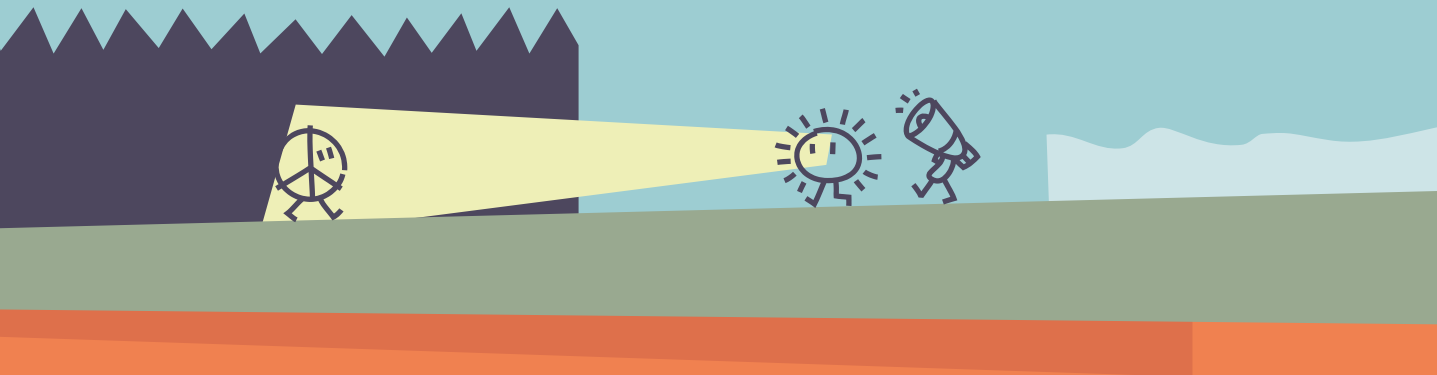
#### LEARNING GOALS:

- *Improve skills in giving and receiving constructive feedback.*
- *Strengthen critical thinking about group processes.*
- *Surface strengths, challenges, and insights from the experience.*
- *Support closure and collective learning.*

#### STEPS:

1. *Gather participants in a large circle to create an atmosphere of openness. Explain that everyone will have a chance to reflect on the experience.*
2. *Invite each participant to share one thing they learned, one positive moment, and one challenge. Encourage them to speak from their own perspective rather than generalising. Allow participants to pass if they prefer to listen first.*
3. *Facilitate a discussion on common themes that emerge from the reflections. Ask the group to consider what aspects of the experience worked well and what could be improved. Keep the discussion balanced between affirmations and constructive critique.*
4. *Encourage participants to propose suggestions for future sessions or programme improvements. Help the group evaluate which suggestions are feasible and meaningful.*
5. *Close with final thoughts from the facilitator or from a volunteer. Acknowledge the effort and engagement of the group. End on a note of appreciation and shared accomplishment.*

# Expect the unexpected



This field guide was born out of the Critical ChangeLab project, where partners across Europe experimented with new forms of democratic education. This three year project was funded through the Horizon Europe programme and carried out by an interdisciplinary consortium led by University of Oulu. Critical ChangeLab partners included key research and non-formal education institutions with expertise on arts, democracy education and technology. The project aimed to:

- **Examine the current state of democracy within education institutions and identify youth's perspectives on everyday democracy**
- **Design a scalable and tailorable model - Critical ChangeLab Model of Democratic Pedagogy - for supporting democratic transformations in formal and non-formal learning environments**
- **Co-create, implement and evaluate the Critical ChangeLab Model in collaboration with stakeholders through a series of participation action research cycles**

## Embracing chaos and shaping change

During the project, partners found that young people are eager to participate, and that this enthusiasm can open new opportunities for schools and organisations. Working alongside young people, many methods were used and improved during several stages of participatory action research. Methods weren't just thought of as tools when working with youth; rather, they are invitations. Invitations to pick up a camera, to sculpt monsters out of clay, to step into someone else's shoes, and to imagine cities where sidewalks bloom with wildflowers.

Instead of sitting still and listening, young people move, make, question, and create. The approach is all about variety - art, games, debates, field trips, and future dreaming - woven together to increase curiosity and collaboration. By experimenting with these diverse methods in diverse contexts, young people can take the lead, blur the lines between educational settings and the world outside, and find new ways to connect with the issues shaping their lives.

All of this reflects a simple truth: democracy-in-the-making is messy, creative, sometimes chaotic, and always in motion. This guide is not here to give answers but to pose questions. It challenges you to draw, cut, build, argue, and dream together with young people.

**Take it with you. Try something out.  
Turn it upside down. Begin again.**



## **Move from reflection to action.**

To learn more about creating a Critical ChangeLab:

- 1. Visit the Critical ChangeLab Library.**  
<https://criticalchangelab.eu/en/library/>
- 2. Enrol in the Critical ChangeLab Online Course.**  
<https://digicampus.fi/course/view.php?id=5919>
- 3. Explore the Critical ChangeLab Model for Democratic Pedagogy**  
<https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18785443>



**Get the tools. Create the change.**

# Glossary

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<b>Democratic attitudes</b>	openness to cultural otherness and to other beliefs, world views and practices, respect, civic-mindedness, responsibility, self-efficacy, tolerance of ambiguity
<b>Political participation</b>	activities through which people develop and express their opinions on the world and how it is governed, as well as take part in and shape the decisions that affect them
<b>Democratic society</b>	a society in which individuals have the power to participate in decision-making
<b>Democratic values</b>	valuing human dignity and human rights, valuing cultural diversity, valuing democracy, justice, fairness, equality and the rule of law
<b>Democratic skills</b>	autonomous learning skills, analytical and critical thinking skills, skills of listening and observing, empathy, flexibility and adaptability, linguistic, communicative and plurilingual skills, co-operation skills, conflict-resolution skills, sense of agency and ability to participate in society
<b>Democratic knowledge and critical understanding</b>	understanding of the self, understanding of language and communication, understanding of the world in its political, legal, human-rights, cultural, religious, historical, media, economic, environmental and sustainability dimensions

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**Democracy education**

civic and citizenship education, civic and democratic literacy, and the competencies needed to live and actively participate in democratic societies.

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**Formal education**

systematic and structured learning processes that take place in classrooms, universities, schools, etc.



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**Non-formal education**

learning that occurs outside of the classroom at places like museums, youth centres, libraries, workshops, etc.

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FOR YOUR NOTES, DRAWINGS,  
SLOGANS, STICKERS, SECRETS, PLANS,  
AND DREAMS.





