

## Participatory Research and Tools

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Bloomington kids map their neighborhood and identify things that need to be changed.

### Introduction:

Though opposing forces are at work, citizen participation is growing throughout the world as grass roots activists demand more involvement in decisions that affect their lives. The word is still out, of course, as to whether civil society groups can tip the balance against non-democratic interests vested in political power, capital, and sectarian ideologies. Nevertheless, it is argued here that participation is, in and of itself, a good thing.

"Participation... provides a collaborative process by which community inhabitants reach common goals, engage in collective decisions, and create places, and these places, in turn, serve as material expressions of their collective efforts." (Feldman, Roberta M. & Westphal, Lynne M. 2000. *Sustaining human settlement: A challenge for the new millennium*. Great Britain: Urban International Press.)

There are multiple, compelling reasons why community development activists should promote the practice of citizen participation. (1)

- Citizen participation helps frame issues in human terms.
- Citizen participation broadens accountability.
- People need to know fully the process and how they fit in.
- Public "input" meetings alone are unsatisfactory.
- A diverse public entails diverse modes of learning, interpretation and creative solutions.
- The people need tools to be on an equal plane with holders of power.
- Participation helps build "democracy with a small d."

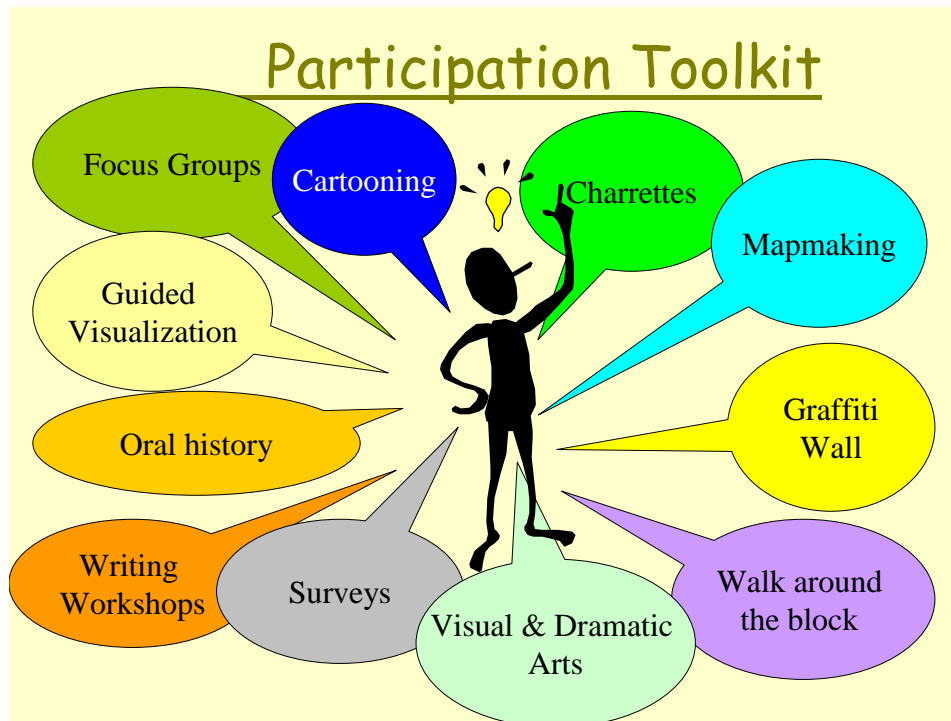
*“Improving a community, from beginning to end, involves organizing people. Money is secondary.”*



Whether a group is planning an elder-friendly community, a kid-friendly community, or simply a community for all ages, there are multiple tools available to engage citizens to participate in the process. These tools can, in fact, be utilized for a range of purposes:

- For conducting qualitative research into the daily experiences of specific target groups (the elderly, kids at risk, homeless persons, new citizens, etc.)
- For understanding the impact of programs and services on the daily lives of those for whom such services are intended.
- For discovering and revealing to a wider audience the needs, skills, talents, and assets of individuals and groups who might otherwise be invisible to the mainstream public and persons in power.
- For gathering and organizing diverse individuals and groups into processes designed to create a shared vision of a better future.
- For simply helping a community learn about itself.

Below, we have provided of potpourri of citizen participation methods and techniques that can be put to some of the above purposes. The range of participation methods is enormous and growing constantly through the creative efforts of community development activists worldwide. (2)



The picture illustrates just a few of the many exciting participation techniques that citizens can use to learn about their communities. A number of these approaches have been "incubated" in Bloomington, Indiana and in other AdvantAge Initiative communities throughout the U.S. While they have been used in planning processes oriented around the idea of elder-friendly communities, they can be applied to any issue of concern. Citizen-led map-making projects, for example, are often used by environmental activists to build awareness of changes in the natural environment. (3) Focus groups are ubiquitous, of course, and can be

applied to almost any particular issue of interest. (4) Oral history projects are proliferating worldwide and can help build a People's History that testifies to the value of ordinary lives or records events that risk erasure in official histories authored by groups in power. (5)

In *Participatory Research Basics*, the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of citizen participation are reviewed and the user of these methods should become familiar with this rationale. Otherwise, the tools are just empty techniques and don't themselves contribute to the "second layer" of learning that can occur when they are used. If used well, the tools can help individuals and groups build their own capacity. Meta-learning will occur as participants learn about something through the tools and also learn about learning at the same time. In this sense, participation tools contribute to the development of learning communities.

In *Tools for Participatory Research* the reader will find examples of participation tools that can be adapted for his/her community group. Many of the tools have fallen into the general repertoire of community activists and facilitators and their specific origins may be hard to define. For others we provide specific reference to their originators and, where possible, we have provided leads to the relevant literature or website contacts.

Over time, we will continue to add participation tools to this website, so not all of the tools cited in the cartoon may be found in the webkit. As the website develops, we'll seek feedback and promote the reader's involvement in a discussion

of the utility of various tools and enable a sharing of experience and the creation of yet another learning community.

### Selecting and crafting the right tool for the job:

Facilitators and planning groups need to pay attention to the practical side of participation tools.

- Some tools work especially well with small groups but become hopelessly complex when applied to large groups.
- Some tools require real-time, simultaneous participation by all of the participants, others can serve a “drive-through” audience.
- Some tools are labor-intensive to develop, others extremely “cheap”.

Since there are multiple factors to consider when selecting and adapting a tool for a particular purpose, we offer a checklist of questions to help lead you to the most appropriate tool. Following the precautions of the old adage “give a kid a hammer and everything becomes a nail”, we encourage the prospective facilitator or planner to select and adapt tools in a deliberative fashion and not hammer everything in sight with one tool.

In the introduction to the various tools, we’ll “score” the tool along the general lines suggested below:

## Criteria for Selecting Tools

What is your desired outcome?

- A. A vision for the future?
- B. An understanding of the past?
- C. An understanding of people's experiences?
- D. An understanding of people's preferences?
- E. An understanding of the impact of a service, program or change in policy?
- F. Identification of a broad range of issues?
- G. ...or a deeper understanding of specifics?
- H. An advocacy position?
- I. A proposal for funding?

What kind of product do you need?

- A. A scientifically valid report?
- B. A performance?
- C. A media product?
- D. A white paper?
- E. A public exhibition or event?
- F. A proposal?

How much time do you have?

- A. How much time do you have to prepare for the task?
- B. How much time are you asking for from the participants?

What will it cost?

- A. Will you use experts or paid facilitators?
- B. Will there be facilities costs?
- C. Will there be supply costs?
- D. Will there be food costs?

How diverse is the group of participants you hope to attract?

- A. By cultural background?
- B. By age?
- C. By education and literacy?
- D. By race?
- E. By tenure in the community?
- F. By income?
- G. By political persuasion?
- H. By degree of power and influence?
- I. By ability?

How many participants do you want to include?

- A. High numbers across a diverse range?
- B. A small, but representative sample?
- C. A random sample?

What kind of engagement will be expected of participants?

- A. Will they have to talk in front of others?
- B. Might they feel intimidated in certain situations or settings?

- C. What are the risks of participation?
- D. How much disclosure is required of participants?
- E. Is participation egalitarian?
- F. Will it be "one and done" or "multiple phases"?
- G. How much fun will people have doing this?

Walking through these questions with your planning group will begin to help you narrow down the choices. In other sections some examples are provided of tools that vary in purpose, cost, diversity of participants and mode of participation. These tools have been used in actual elder-friendly community projects but can be adapted, and should be adapted to your local needs and circumstances. The reader is encouraged to both inquire of the author and share his/her experiences with these and other participation tools as they are employed.

Endnotes for this section

1. Some of these criteria have been taken from Participation Works! 21 techniques of community participation for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. ND. New Economics Foundation, First Floor Vine Court, 112-116 Whitechapel Road, London E1 1 JE, [julie.lewis@neweconomics.org](mailto:julie.lewis@neweconomics.org)

2. For example, see the website for the International Association for Public Participation, <http://www.iap2.org/boardlink/aboutiap2.html>

3. For a very compelling picture of the value of bioregional and neighborhood mapmaking, see the BullFrog film Maps with Teeth, featuring Peter Berg of the Planet Drum Foundation and Canadian cartographer Doug Abberley. <http://www.bullfrogfilms.com/catalog/wwl10.html>

4. See The Focus Group Kit, a series of six handy guides to the multiple uses and types of focus groups, Morgan, David L. and Krueger, Richard A., 1998. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications.

5. See the Museum of the Person websites for an example of on-line community based life story projects:

<http://www.museudapessoa.net/>

<http://www.bloomington.in.us/~mop-i/>