

Skill Toolkit

PARTICIPATORY METHODS CREATE

In the process of creation, people identify and represent issues and ideas artistically.

THE STORY

In 2003, a coalition of NYC residents, businesses and public advocates joined together to revitalize 14 blocks of public space along two high traffic streets in Manhattan's Lower East Side and Chinatown. Allen Street and Pike Street were hectic corridors with bus and truck traffic that created constant noise and exhaust pollution. Yet these major roadways flanked one of the largest public open spaces in the neighborhoods known as "pedestrian malls". Over the years, the malls separating these two busy streets had become marred by urban blight – crumbling sidewalk, dismantled benches, garbage and neglected vegetation rendering the malls unusable.

A non-profit design and advocacy organization called Hester Street Collaborative led a community effort to rejuvenate these spaces by engaging local residents, art and cultural organizations, and elected officials in a joint design process. The organization held art workshops and events over several years to build consensus and generate design recommendations for the city agencies responsible for redeveloping and maintaining the site.

Public school students engaged in several of these art and design programs. In one workshop, youth built models of the malls out of everyday craft materials. The models allowed young people to propose whimsical visions for the malls using winding paths, waterways, and plantings. Their models also suggested creative ways to use this sliver of public space for art installations, playgrounds, and food vendors. The models were displayed at a weekend event for local residents who voted on their preferred ideas for the renovation.

Self guided and group walking tours encouraged other residents to add their design ideas. The tours allowed participants to experience the malls block by block to get a sense of the challenges and potential for making the malls inviting. Participants drew sketches of their visions and suggestions, which were collected and later exhibited at a community event for

others to vote on. These recommendations were brought to the attention of New York City's Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) and Department of Transportation (DOT) to advocate for community perspectives in the maintenance of neighborhood resources. The city agencies have begun implementing plans to reconstruct the malls based on community priorities, including safer pedestrian crossings, protected bike paths, art installations, and open space for cultural events.

◀ For more information visit
Hester Street Collaborative
<http://www.hesterstreet.org>

DESCRIPTION

The efforts of NGOs to improve communities are often invisible to many people. Creative projects can bring community members together and make social sector work visible in different ways. This may mean bringing a topic or problem to community members' attention, or inviting participation from a wider range of people to include local knowledge, values, and experiences as a part of policy conversations.

For example, organizations focused on public improvement might typically hold a hearing and then prepare a report to explain problems that citizens want addressed. But this version of community involvement can be alienating for people who are not typically active or whose opinions are usually disregarded in official forums. Public hearings are often long-drawn-out affairs with specific protocols for participation – youth, the elderly, and speakers of non-dominant languages are some examples of groups that are underrepresented in these forums. Similarly, printed documents are limited by the number of copies that can be produced, the accessibility of the language in which it is written, and the motivation to read the report.

Creative arts such as photography, filmmaking, or writing and performing plays can help people present issues in ways that are more widely accessible to a diverse audience. The process of learning to create can serve as a “hook”, encouraging people to identify problems, discuss challenging issues, and represent their own ideas about those issues.

Creating also helps to open up lines of communication. It's an easy and common sense notion in art making, that each individual has a unique creative perspective. No two creations are alike. Because of this assumption, creative expression opens the door for multiple points of view since it is already understood that many participants will create many different products. When integrated with serious and nuanced discussion of problems and issues, it may be easier to see that no singular perspective or approach can be expected.

FORMS OF CREATING AND ARTISTIC REPRESENTATION MAY INCLUDE

| | |
|-----------------|-----------------------------------------------|
| Film making | Radio broadcasting |
| Photography | Plays |
| Drawing | Dance |
| Model making | Storytelling |
| Audio recording | Writing and reading poetry, prose, or fiction |

Creative methods also help communities develop a shared language or culture. Excitement over a new way to discuss problems can generate

enthusiasm for considering new ideas or even the adoption of policies directly linked to that novel method. This is particularly helpful when the act of creating is linked to issues that may otherwise be challenging to address.

Adding creative activities to small group interactions and public forums is an important way to inspire more opportunities to develop collective goals for change.

DEVELOPING AN INNOVATION MINDSET

Creating allows new ways to view an issue or problem that goes beyond conventional reports or listing of facts. In addition, it welcomes participation from a wide range of stakeholders to question, re-define impact, and propose solutions.

HOW TO

Step 1

Select a medium

Select a creative methodology that offers an accessible way for your community to share ideas, such as a fine art technique, a local craft or custom, artistic performance, or creative writing. Select a medium that will allow participants to engage imaginatively with some issue or concern that may be otherwise difficult to address. Consider the resources that are available and whether facilitators need training or support to lead participants in creation.

Ask questions such as:

- What form of creation connects with an issue or problem that requires discussion?
- What form of creation will serve as a “hook” for potential participants?
- What resources are available to support the project?

Use these related skills: [Brainstorm](#)

Step 2

Demonstrate the creative method as a form of representation

Plan a session where participants can learn basic skills essential to the artistic method. Include a discussion of key terminology, introduction to materials, and demonstration of tools and techniques. Discuss how the medium is used to represent ideas. Initiate these discussions by showing examples of finished products and discussing what is conveyed by the piece. These conversations can offer a simple or a sophisticated analysis. The purpose is to show that the medium chosen can be used to express ideas or feelings about a topic.

It can be rewarding to engage professional creators to demonstrate their craft and talk about what is represented in their work. Additionally, visit museums and galleries to look at creations that may serve as a guide.

Ask questions such as:

- What key terms are essential to this art form?
- What specific materials and tools are needed to use this method of creation?
- Who can demonstrate proper use of materials, tools and techniques?
- Where can I locate examples of creations?

Use these related skills: [Brainstorm](#), [Dialogue](#), [Facilitation](#), [Interview](#), [Network](#), [Question](#)

◀ Back to the story

Chinatown and Lower East Side residents had many complaints about traffic and safety along Allen and Pike Streets. However, as a community with a high population of new immigrants, many residents were reluctant to share their opinions at public hearings because of language barriers. HSC decided to attend local cultural festivals to solicit ideas by asking residents to simply tell their own “Park Stories”. The stories were recorded and residents were excited to learn that they would later be added to the oral history collection at the public library. This opportunity encouraged participation from a wider range of residents. The project required many volunteers who spoke in several Chinese dialects as well as Spanish to accommodate the dominant languages spoken in the neighborhood.

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As part of an intensive summer program, 20 students were asked to study the Allen Street and Pike Street malls and propose a memorial for the site. Students interviewed community residents about the area and met with local historians to learn about the history of the Lower East Side. They learned about architecture and design from local professionals and artists and then visited nearby memorials and museums for inspiration. They had access to art materials and tools and learned how to use them to express their ideas and questions about the neighborhood.

Step 3

Expression Preliminary discussion of issues

Ultimately, creation is about expression. Participants translate their thoughts about the issue using a selected methodology. Use the art form to engage in dialogue about problems or issues of concern. Encourage the participation of the local community to share their stories, ideas, and experiences. Consider the most appropriate methods of communication to facilitate discussion and dialogue.

Ask questions such as:

- How can I gather information from a diverse group of people?
- What kind of space or event will allow people to participate?

Use these related skills: [Brainstorm](#), [Critique](#), [Dialogue](#), [Facilitation](#), [Network](#), [Self-Reflection](#), [Space](#), [Stewardship](#)

See the skill [Presentation for instruction on sharing creations with audiences](#).

LIMITATIONS

- Creating often requires resources and expertise/facilitation.

RESOURCES

- **Hester Street Collaborative (HSC): Ground Up**
Ground Up is a design education program that teaches architecture and art concepts through hands-on, site-based workshops. HSC partners with New York City based schools to bring together architects, local artists, activists, teachers and public school students to transform school and neighborhood public spaces. Through design and build projects, residents are encouraged to view their surroundings in a new and critical way.
<http://hesterstreet.org/>
- **The Center for Urban Pedagogy (CUP)**
CUP works with citizen groups to explore civic issues related to urban policy and planning. They research complex legal and policy issues and represent important information in simple but attractive graphically designed publications and websites. These tools help their constituents to better advocate for their own community needs.
<http://welcometocup.org/>
- **Well Told Story**
Well Told Story merges stories and media to inspire positive social change. Through comic books, radio shows, and social media profiles, popular characters recreate human stories and experiences that engage audiences and motivate activism.
<http://wts.co.ke/>

◀ Back to the story

The students created a walking tour booklet that could be used to solicit community feedback. During a series of community park events, residents were each given a walking tour booklet that was translated into several languages. Through individual or group tours around Allen Street and Pike Street, participants could personally experience the challenges and opportunities in this public space. Each completed booklet reflected the voices of those who most use these spaces, providing feedback, suggestions, and recommendations. These data were used to tell create architectural designs for a sidewalk mural that told the history of the Lower East side, improved signage, and creative benches to provide seating. The designs were presented at community meetings to inspire further discussion and debate about the best ways to redesign the space.

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In order to invite as much input as possible the project required the resources and network to inspire layered forms of engagement. For instance, experts in design and community organizing facilitated meetings. Flyers and notices about the initiative were created in multiple languages and advertised in a variety of local newspapers and community sites.

References

Shepard, Cassim. (October 18, 2010). *Mall-terations on Allen Street, Urban Omnibus*. <http://urbanomnibus.net/2010/10/mallterations-on-allen-street/>
A public art installation called mall-terations profiled the work of local artists involved in the redevelopment project.

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