

How to develop students' engagement in the creation of civil society?

Tools for participatory-oriented education

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Social trends:

- weakening of social bonds during the COVID-19 pandemic,
- growing indifference and lack of engagement in local community life,
- social isolation and focus solely on fulfilling individual needs,
- the Fifth Industrial Revolution – Society 5.0, a human-centered approach that balances economic development with addressing social challenges (Competition Policy Brief, European Commission, 2021),
- the need for thoughtful and sustainable revitalization based on social needs (New European Bauhaus, 2025).



Social needs:

- Engaging citizens in the sustainable development of urban areas,
- Improving communication between citizens and local authorities,
- Promoting the idea of civil society among students in Europe,
- Developing academic curricula focused on teaching communication between citizens and local authorities,
- Including soft skills development activities for students in academic education programs.



- Research indicates that participatory education enhances democratic competencies and a sense of agency among students. Integrating community engagement into the curriculum supports a deeper understanding of the individual's role in society.
- To stimulate civic participation in higher education, key factors include cultural diversity experiences, social responsibility, and student-university partnerships (Owusu-Agyeman, Fourie-Malherbe, 2019).



- According to Biesta (2011) good education in a democratic society should not only qualify and socialize, but also subjectify – enabling individuals to become autonomous and responsible actors.
- At the universities we should not only transfer knowledge, but **empower students as changemakers**, capable of shaping their social environments.

This is where participatory civic education comes into play.

- **“Every human being is a designer. Many of the things we do in our everyday lives are acts of design.”** (Manzini, 2015, p. 53)



"Education must be at the heart of a new social contract — one that transforms the future by fostering inclusive and sustainable development" (UNESCO report *Rethinking Education*, 2015).

Aim of the research:

to identify **practical tools and pedagogical methods** that support student education in participation processes and civic responsibility.



The research was conducted in the frames of the HEIsCITI HEIs as Innovative Triggers of Sustainable Development in European Cities in Post Covid-19 era (Erasmus+Cooperation partnerships in higher education, 01.12.2022 – 30.11.2025)

Project goal:

To develop universal curricula (methodologies and teaching tools) aimed at educating students on the best practices of participation—collaboration between citizens and local authorities—to ensure sustainable urban development in the post-COVID-19 era.

- WSB University (leader)
- Stuttgart Media University (Germany)
- Mykolas Romeris Universitetas (Lithuania)
- The University of Da Nang (Vietnam)
- LAMA Cooperative Society - Social Enterprise (Italy)
- CEKOM - SMART RI d.o.o. (Croatia)



Teaching Strategic Framework:

- Interdisciplinary curricula,
- Real-life urban challenges in abandoned areas,
- Integration of experiential learning,
- Feedback loops, co-design and co-assessment.

In practice:

- participatory workshops in neglected urban areas in Poland, Lithuania and Germany. In Poland, students participated in workshops co-developing interventions in underused urban spaces. In Germany, stakeholder forums focused on inclusive city planning. In Lithuania, social mapping was used to connect municipality to the citizens. These activities **embedded academic learning into real civic challenges**, building a strong sense of **agency and ownership**.

Pilot in Cieszyn, Poland:

Applied approach: project-based learning and elements of design thinking

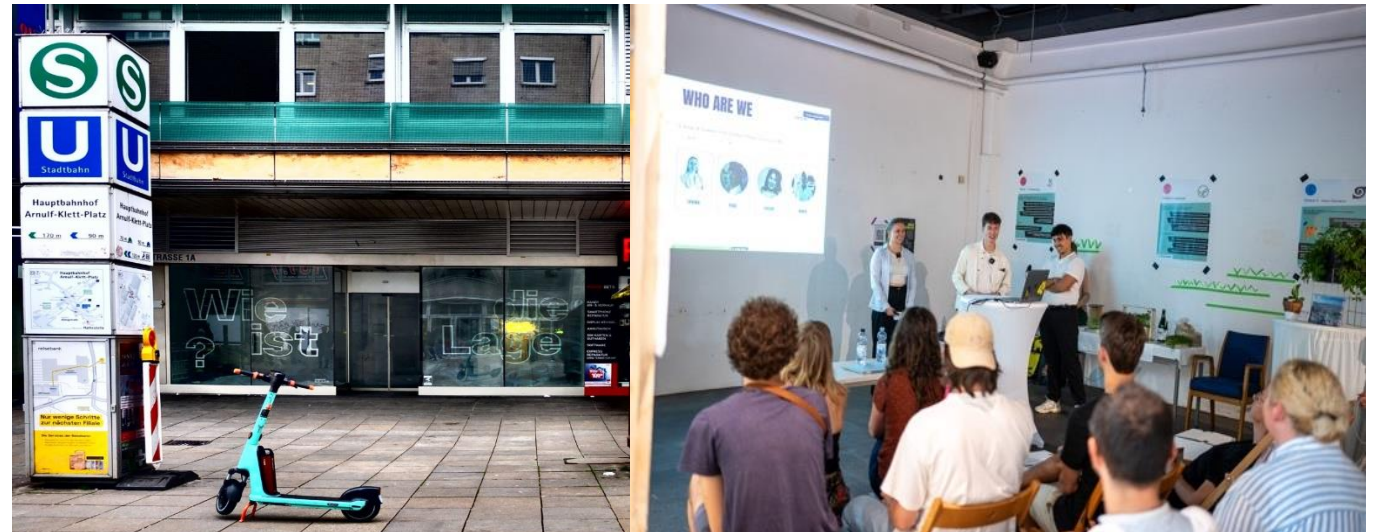
Challenge: to design the development of the area surrounding the university building in Cieszyn, incorporating the principles of inclusivity and sustainable development.



Pilot in Stuttgart, Germany:

Applied approach: design thinking

Challenge: to design the use of a vacant building in the city center that would serve the local community while adhering to the principles of inclusivity and sustainable development.



Pilot in Joniskis, Lithuania:

Applied approach: design thinking

Challenge: to design an effective communication strategy between city officials and residents.







Methodology of research:

- Survey, pretest and posttest among students in Poland, Lithuania and Germany,
- Semi-experiments – pilots in 3 countries,
- Observations during the workshops,
- In-depth interviews with stakeholders in 3 countries.



Results:

Pre-test and post-test revealed:

- a significant increase in the understanding of the concept of community (from 53% correct answers in the pre-test to 80% in the post-test);
- improved understanding of the principles of the Design Thinking method, which is essential for conducting participatory activities.



Results:

Survey showed that:

- the course proved to be highly effective (an overall increase in the number of correct answers and a positive average change of +1.13 points per participant),
- it had a real impact on enhancing participants' knowledge of participatory processes.



Interviews and observations revealed:

students approached the project with curiosity and engagement, showing genuine interest in the topic as a result of working with a real-world challenge and direct interaction with stakeholders.

“The project opened my mind.”

“For me, it was something tangible – a chance to practice essential skills like listening to people and co-creating solutions with them.”

Students developed:

- a stronger sense of agency,
- enhanced co-design competences,
- awareness of social responsibility.



Recommended Techniques and Tools for Participation Processes

- Stakeholders Map
- Mapping
- Persona
- Surveys and In-Depth Interviews
- Observations
- Challenges and Opportunities Analysis
- Charrette
- Storytelling
- Idea generation
- Prototyping



The applied approach and the tools used demonstrate that student can become **co-researchers and co-designers**, applying civic knowledge in practice.

This aligns with findings by Mitra & Serriere (2012), who emphasize that youth civic engagement must be *authentic, participatory, and embedded in meaningful contexts*.

“The most radical innovation is often the one that enables people to act differently, together.” (Manzini, 2015,p. 103)



Recommendations:

- embedding civic participation in academic programs,
- scaling up best practices,
- supporting inclusive recovery and urban innovation.

Civic Participation can be taught within the framework of subjects such as, eg:

- design thinking,
- problem-based learning,
- project management,
- management of public, commercial, and social projects,
- urban planning,
- pedagogy,
- sociology, etc.



- **Important insights:**
 - developing design guidelines: the outcomes of participatory activities should be translated into concrete guidelines for architects, urban planners, and decision-makers, ensuring that the project responds to actual needs;
 - the process carried out with students by the university should be clearly explained and recommended in advance to local authorities and decision-makers, so that they treat students as partners and are prepared to engage in collaboration,
 - processes must be grounded in real, recognized issues—students need to feel that the community identifies a challenge and genuinely wants to work on it.



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Thank you very much

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