# Learning by doing

Erasmus+ and the European Solidarity Corps both encourage projects that are based on informal learning and non-formal educational approaches. Learning competencies (knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) that are relevant to youth participation, and actively applying them to create change, is a key part of every project.

In participatory, non-formal education, participants learn from their experiences.
In formal education, the teacher is typically assumed to hold the knowledge, and is expected to share it with the learners. In non-formal learning, participants generate knowledge themselves, learning from their environment, their experiences and their dialogue with each other.

A way of thinking about participants' learning that fits well with youth participation is the **cycle of experiential learning** [1].
In this model of learning, participants learn from their experiences and then actively try to apply their learning in new experiences,
to create changes in their lives and the world around them (see the 🌐 Creating change module). The cycle has four stages.
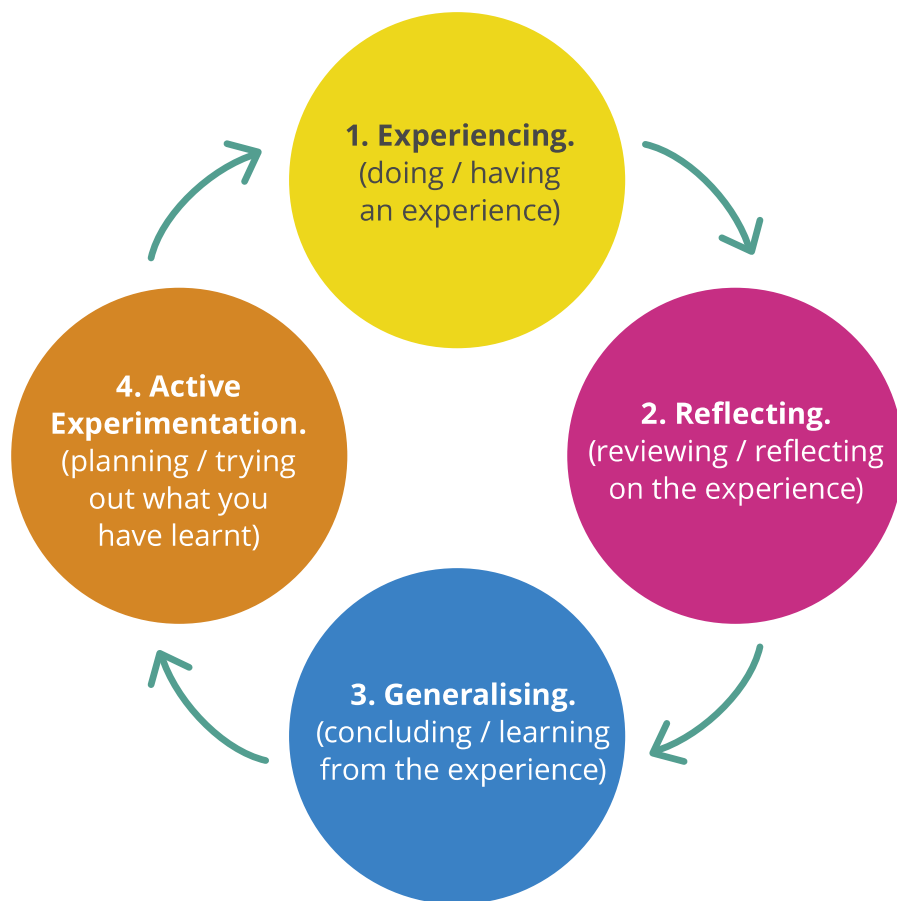
1. Experiencing. Participants will begin a project with many experiences already. Across their lives, they have had the experience of trying to make their voices heard, or trying to take action and create changes in the world around them. These experiences are the starting point from which participants' learning can begin. Any kind of experience, even those that have not been fun or have been negative, can be a source of learning, so everyone has something they can contribute.

2. Reflecting. This involves participants reflecting on and reviewing their experiences. For example, participants might begin by identifying the situations in which they want their voices to be more heard, or themes on which they want to be able to take action.

3. Generalising. Building on their reflections, discuss patterns and common themes. They begin to plan activities they can put in place to try and generate action or have their voices heard more. These plans might form the basis for a project design. For example, if participants identified that they had a limited opportunity to speak to politicians about environmental issues, they might plan an event or an activity that resolves this by bringing young people and politicians together.

4. Applying. Participants put their plans into action and test out their ideas. They experiment with new ways of doing things that they may not have tried before. This stage of learning occurs during the implementation of project activities, which provides participants with the practical opportunity to test out their ideas.

Once these activities have occurred, participants can reflect on whether they achieved the change they wanted, or improved the situation they were trying to address. The activities they put in place create concrete new experiences from which participants can learn. As participants evaluate their activities, a new learning cycle begins. Participants can go on to plan the next stage of activities in a project or even their next project based on their reflection and new learning.

[1] Based on Kolb, D. (1984). *Experiential Learning, Experience as the Source of Learning and Development*, Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.

📖 Focusing on: Facilitating learning

Leading a participatory learning process involves acting as a facilitator rather than as a teacher. Rather than being an expert who shares their knowledge about a topic, a facilitator is someone who supports learners and groups of participants in taking charge and directing their own learning and projects. Working in this way means that power is transferred from the educator to the learners, which supports the goal of making the project participatory.

Facilitating self-directed learning in groups can involve;

Recognising that project participants already have a wide range of competencies, and that they can learn from each other and learn together.

Using techniques that encourage participants to ask broader questions about political and social issues questions, and how their lives are impacted by these.

Accepting that project participants have an understanding of their lives and can identify their own issues and challenges, as well as strategies for increasing their own participation in democratic life.

Supporting participants in working together to identify collective action and strategies they wish to implement.

For example, during a project, a facilitator might guide the participants most closely in the very early planning stages, with the aim of transferring power and decision-making to the participants as soon as possible. As the group takes off the facilitator might then apply a more hands-off approach in order to enable the group to implement their ideas effectively.
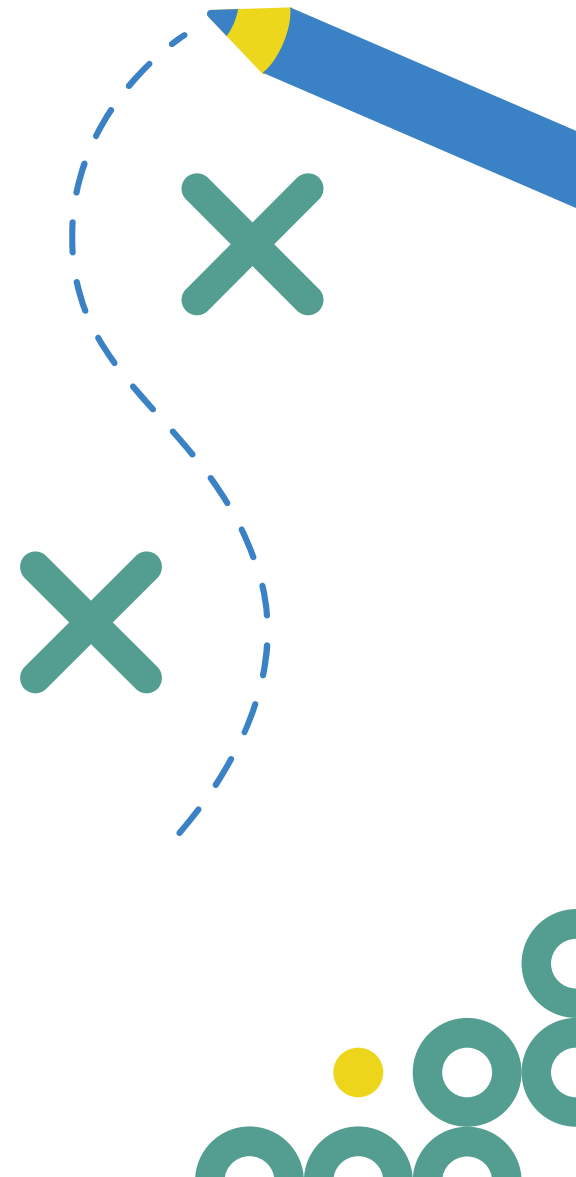
Focusing on: Inclusion and Diversity

One of the key roles of a facilitator is to help challenge any discrimination and inequality related to ethnicity, religion, sexuality, gender, disability or any other form of social differentiation, if any takes place in a project. There are many ways of doing this, including:
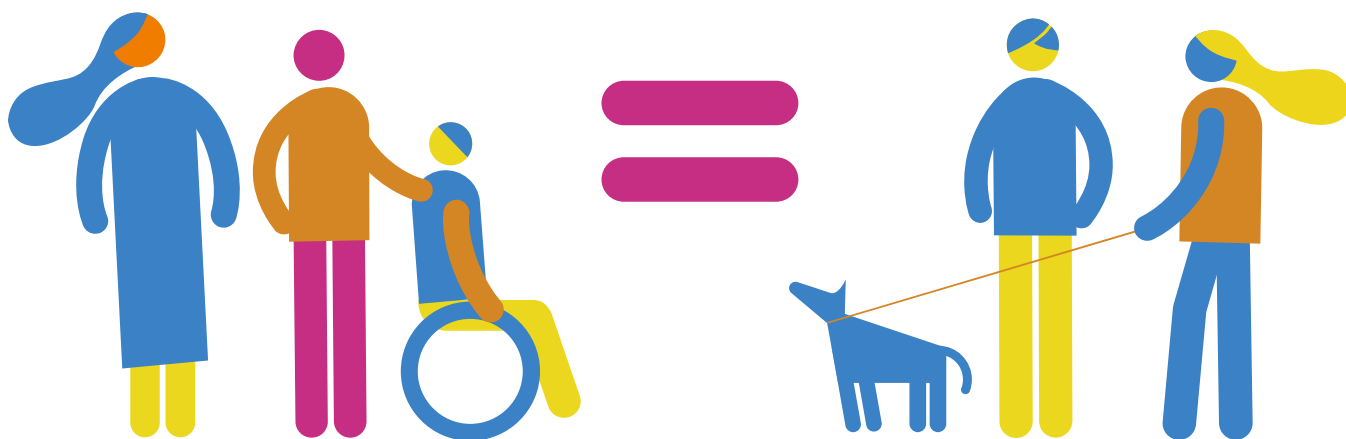
Supporting participants to identify patterns of exclusion and to design their activities inclusively.

Challenging discrimination or hate speech if it occurs and offering support to those it is directed towards.

Enabling participants to create group agreements on how they want to work together and support each other to ensure that everyone can be included.

Providing additional support to participants who may need this to be fully included or to actively participate.

Focusing on: Digital Transformations

In the digital world, it is possible to share your ideas/projects/results with anyone around the world. Likewise, it is possible to interact with people from different perspectives. Online platforms can support your process of learning and you can also use them to share your results in order to inspire others.

If you are a project leader or facilitator who uses digital tools to work with participants, it can be important to set boundaries and manage expectations about the learning support that participants can expect from you. Communicating clearly about how you want to be communicated with, when, using which media and how long participants might need to wait for a response can help manage expectations and avoid misunderstandings.

If you create a digital space to facilitate participants' learning through interaction (e.g. group chat), it will be accessible 24/7, unlike in a face-to-face setting. As a facilitator, it is not possible to moderate this sort of space around the clock. Therefore, it can be important to set clear ground rules and boundaries for how the space should be used. This may include the purpose of the group and some principles for users to ensure that the interaction and discussion is respectful and inclusive.
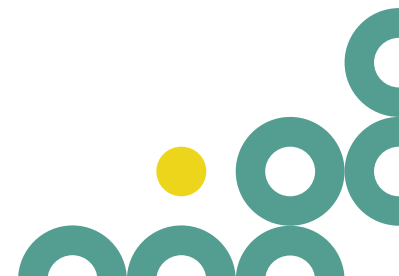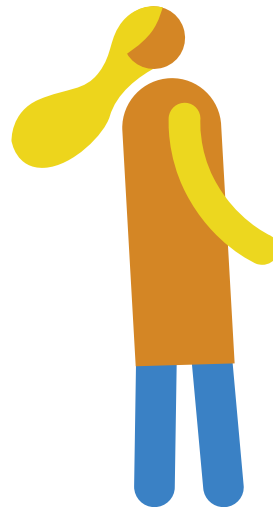
🌐 Focusing on: Sustainability, environmental and climate goals

The 17 🌐 UN Sustainable Development Goals can provide a good learning resource to engage in dialogue and reflection around sustainability.

Participatory experiential learning methods are well suited to sustainability education. They engage young people in thinking about what is at stake in climate change, on the basis of which they can design and implement effective actions to combat it. Reflecting on this improves their competence for further action.

Ensuring the world becomes sustainable requires changes in the way of life of those living in Europe and other developed countries. Our current consumption patterns and use of resources is unsustainable. This means there is a strong need to test and implement new ways of living that are not resource intensive.

If you want to go deeper...

visit

🛜 participationpool.eu
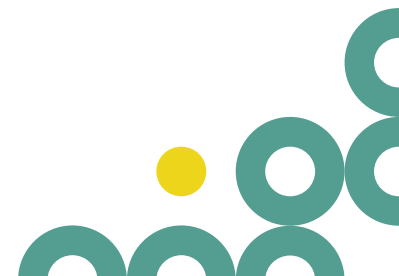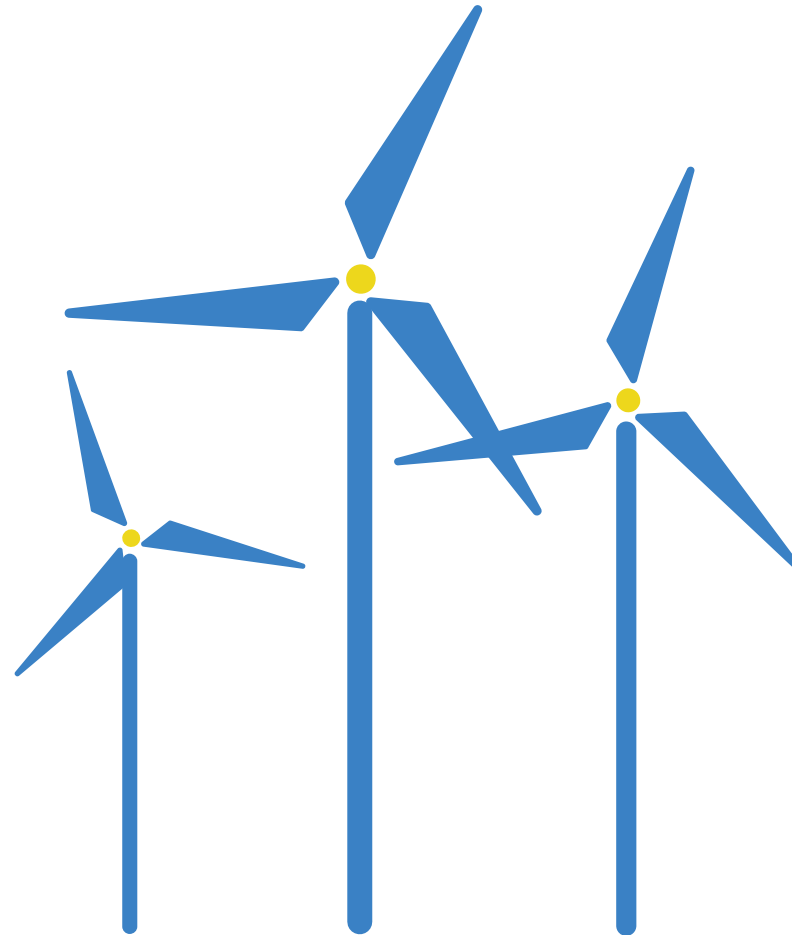
📖 Or check out:

The Council of Europe's 🛜 Competences for Democratic Culture provides a framework for the different competencies needed in a democratic society and for how to educate around those.

The YWelp Project's learning module on 🛜 non-formal learning and youth participation introduces the concept and opportunities of non-formal learning in youth work, the concept and models of youth participation in youth work, and examples of participation experiences.

The EU-Council of Europe Youth partnership's 🛜 Study on the value of informal education, with special attention to its contribution to citizenship education, civic participation and intercultural dialogue and learning, European citizenship, peace-building and conflict transformation by Sladjana Petkovic introduces the concepts of informal learning and informal education and their value and impact, as well as validation and tools for the recognition of non-formal and informal learning.

The 🛜 Participation and Sustainable Europe Website provides a variety of tools to support learning and participation around environmental issues.

Recognition of participant learning

You can offer Youthpass as a tool to participants for reflecting on their learning and for gaining recognition for that learning.

Youthpass is a tool to document and recognise learning outcomes from youth work and solidarity activities in the context of projects funded by Erasmus+ and European Solidarity Corps programmes. It is part of the European Commission's strategy to foster the recognition of non-formal learning.

While creating their Youthpass certificate together with a support person, project participants describe what they have done in their project and which competences they have acquired. This is how Youthpass supports reflection on the personal non-formal learning process and outcomes of individuals.

As a Europe-wide recognition instrument for non-formal learning in the context of youth work supported by the EU, Youthpass strengthens the social recognition of youth work.

Youthpass supports the active European citizenship of young people and of youth workers by describing the added value of their project for the common good.

Youthpass also helps support the employability of young people and youth workers by raising their awareness of and helping them to describe their competences, by documenting their acquisition of those competences and by providing certification.

visit
www.youthpass.eu
to begin using Youthpass in your project.
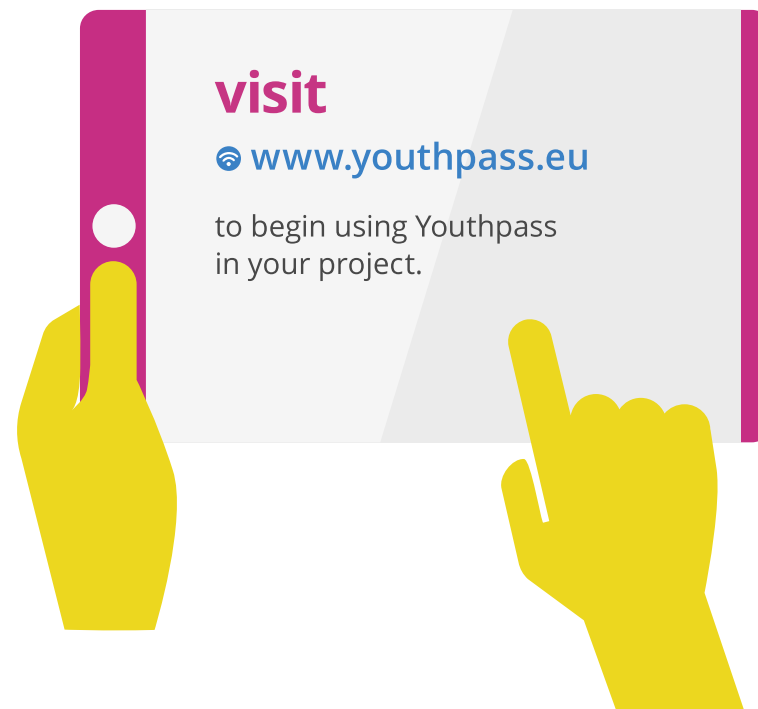
Creating conditions for experiential learning

To create conditions for participation through experiential learning, you could implement some of the following strategies:

Ask participants what youth participation means for them.
Define youth participation together with all participants and/or your youth group and set appropriate expectations – youth participation can come in many forms, depending on your specific context and situation...

Cooperatively create ground rules to encourage youth participation.
With participants, develop a set of working principles everyone is asked to respect to ensure participation. Offer the space to the participants to share their ideas and opinions on what these principles are. Let everyone know that all ideas and opinions are welcome and that every youth group member and every participant is to be respected.

Creating conditions for experiential learning

Encourage youth participation.
Act according to what you are saying, and make sure young people feel encouraged to have a VOICE or to take ACTION throughout the activity or project. When appropriate, step back and let the group lead themselves while you remain available for support if they need it.

Appreciate youth participation.
Thank every young person for their contributions during the project - often and visibly.