Participate as a Pro

Connect with local actors and co-initiate action

RELATING | Humility

What you will need:

- Teams of 3-5
- Team project
- 10 mins preparation
- 3 hours execution + field research of a few days

Menu:

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"Equip student teams with the methodology to not only observe, but relate and contribute actively to local initiatives to promote public well-being."

—Guido Knibbe

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I. Overview

Participation in community and urban development often emphasises the citizen's role in shaping more inclusive and user-focused environments. However, less focus is on the organisations and professionals who initiate these participation tracks.

'Participating as a Pro' shifts this perspective by engaging professionals directly with those affected by improvement efforts. This approach fosters mutual understanding and respect, using participant observation to gather deep insights into the lived experiences of community members, including often overlooked voices.

This tool equips student teams to observe and actively contribute to local initiatives that enhance public well-being, moving towards meaningful participation and collaboration.

Learning outcome

- The student is able to relate to a diverse range of people and serve public well-being

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II. Learning Activity

Students perform participant observation and co-initiate local collaboration for public well-being.



1. Identifying Locations and Actors

1 hr

Instruct students to identify key locations and actors relevant to their project, or the general theme they seek to address, along with any existing assumptions about these elements. First, students answer the questions below individually:

- What questions and/or issues, relevant to the location, do we want to learn about?
- In which places might we gain relevant insights on these questions and/or issues?
- Who are the relevant actors in these places and connected to these questions and/or issues?
- What do we currently know about these places and actors?

Then, students discuss their answers with the team to produce a collective written set of responses.



2. A First Sense

1 - 2 hrs

Students plan times and places for their first site visits, either individually or with their team members.

To get a first sense, students observe the site without a specific aim. The idea here is to observe and engage with people casually, avoiding formal research methods and suspending any goals and evaluations at this stage.

After the first visit, instruct teams to review the collective answers from Step 1 and check if they'd like to update any of their answers.

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3. Participant Observation

2 hrs

The student teams plan more site visits and prepare to engage in participant observation. Share the Overview & Planning Sheet for Teams to assist with research preparations.

To participate actively in daily life, take up a practical role in activities that allow for casually spending (part of) a day with people of interest. Therefore, students can volunteer, initiate an activity or join in practical activities with the people they seek to learn about.

Ask the students to document and reflect on their observations and experiences in a field journal, following the instructions and guidelines.

Tip: remind students of the research aim of gathering insights on the lived experiences of relevant actors, including themselves and the currently "voiceless", those whose viewpoints and experiences have been neglected so far.



4. How Might We

30 mins

While spending time in the field observing, talking, documenting and reflecting, students assess any present challenges and needs of local actors, and how public well-being can be served. Instruct each team to discuss:

- If we consider the place with its inhabitants and users as a whole, what would be its most important message to us?
- What change or changes would the place as a whole wish for?
- What conditions might challenge such change or changes?
- How might needed change or changes be brought about, and by whom?

While discussing, encourage each team to synthesise their insights into an accurate, action-oriented question. For this purpose, students can use the "How Might We" format:

"How might we help <actors/stakeholders> with <need> despite <challenges>?"

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Tip: we recommend at least two of these discussions throughout the research process.



5. Organising for Action

30 mins

Having formulated a fitting “How Might We” question, teams can now seek to identify actors and/or stakeholders willing to participate actively in addressing identified community needs.

Students can use the map of participant involvement to consider what type of involvement fits best for each actor, given the circumstances. Some actors may co-produce certain project elements, while others may take on a part themselves or choose to remain involved passively as a manager or recipient providing direction or advice, for example.

Depending on the design of the course and the project scope, students can communicate their findings to relevant actors and step out of the project, or remain active participants and collaborate on future steps.

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III. Assessment

While participant observation research is ongoing (Step 3) and after the teams have synthesised their insights (Step 4), students reflect individually or in a one-on-one discussion with you, using the reflective questions. Students can use the questionnaire for self–assessment to reflect on their courage. To foster even deeper learning, ask the students to answer these questions about their experiences with each other.



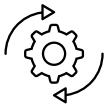
Purpose

Assessment *as* learning aims to strengthen the learning process and the development of metacognitive skills. It empowers students to direct their learning and to become independent, critical self-assessors.



Roles

Self-assessment



Characteristics

Self-regulated learning



Materials

Reflective questions

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Assessment

Reflective questions

Reflect on the project you've been involved in and address the following questions:

- What was your general experience of visiting sites and engaging with people? What stood out during these interactions? Provide specific examples from your field research.
- Reflect on a time when you interacted with someone from an unfamiliar background (cultural, professional, or otherwise). To what extent could you relate to this person's experiences and needs? Provide details of these particular interactions.
- How did you translate research findings into insights on how to serve the needs of stakeholders? Describe the process, including your research findings, reflections, and discussions that led to insights on potential solutions.
- To what extent do you feel you were able to incorporate diverse perspectives into the solutions and next steps? Discuss your efforts to understand a broad range of people and how you collaborated with them.

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IV. Key Advice

For those wishing to read up on this ethnographic method, Verloo (2020) provides a useful discussion of participant observation in urban contexts and Emerson et al. (2011) provide great guidelines for writing field notes.

Download more information on **participant observation**, **personal field journal instructions** (Step 3), the **overview & planning sheet for teams** (Step 3) and the **map of participant involvement** (Step 5) below.

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Key Advice

Fostering meaningful participation and collaboration

We are currently witnessing active discourse and policy development focused on participation, which weaves together design and planning with community building and social cohesion. This discourse often centres on the participating citizen, highlighting how inhabitants and users can contribute to more inclusive and user-oriented design while addressing challenges that range from personal (e.g., loneliness) to societal (e.g., democracy) and global (e.g., climate).

In this context, participation is typically seen as a step that citizens take towards an initiating party, such as completing a questionnaire, attending a consultation evening or caring for the community garden. However, less attention is given to the role of organisations and institutions that propose these participation opportunities. Specifically, how much can these parties and their staff contribute to meaningful participation? This tool aims to address the role of the participating professional.

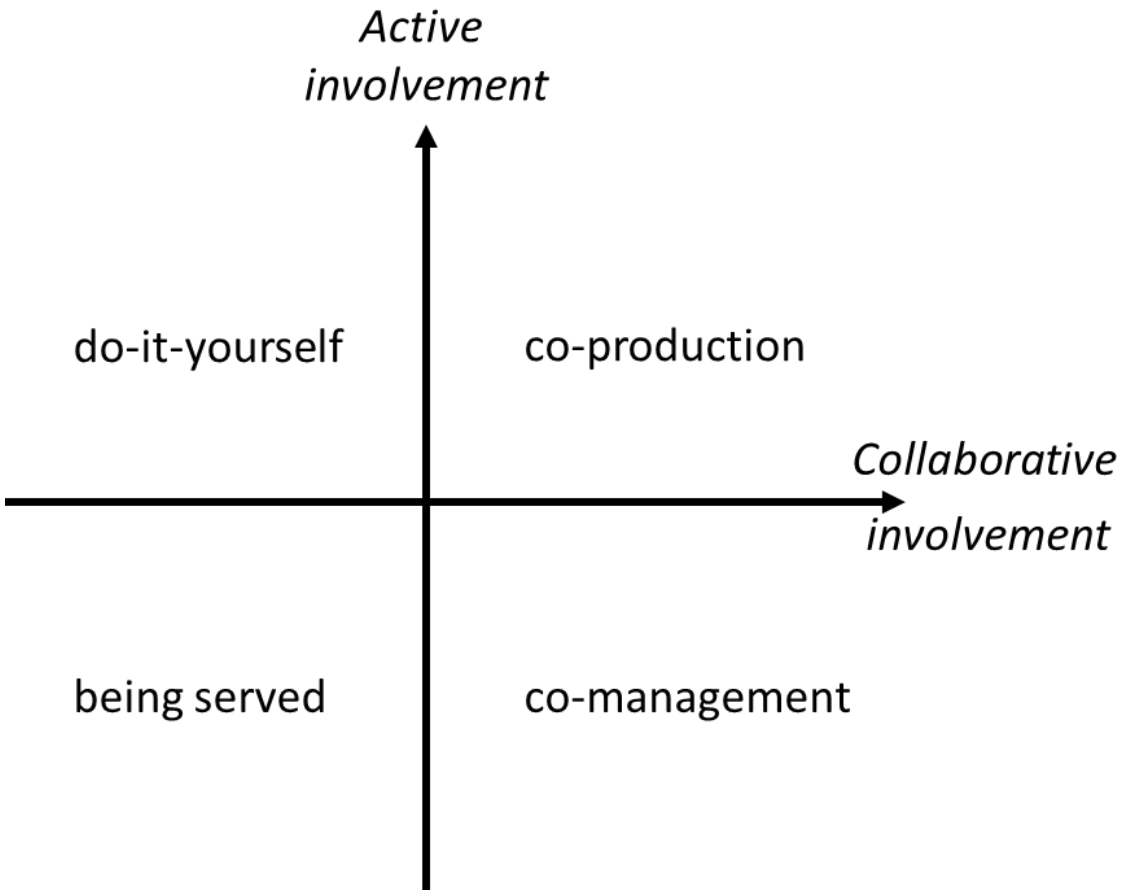
'Participating as a Pro' means moving towards people impacted by improvement efforts. It involves actively seeking to understand their lived experiences by engaging in day-to-day life and applying professional skills to enhance public well-being. This requires humility: understanding the lived realities of people first, then collaboratively setting goals and deciding on the most suitable approaches for improvements. With this foundation, further participation and collaboration can thrive, built on mutual understanding and respect.

Participant observation is particularly well-suited to these goals of relating to people and co-initiating action. This method can challenge preconceived notions about how a place is lived in and used, who belongs and who does not, and the stereotypical images of neighbourhoods and their residents (Verloo, 2020). In practice, this tool provides guidelines for student teams to gather insights on the lived experiences of relevant actors, including inhabitants, users and regulators, as well as those currently "voiceless" (i.e., those whose viewpoints and experiences have been overlooked) concerning a current issue. Once sufficient insights have been collected, student teams can facilitate the organisation of relevant actors to co-initiate practical actions to improve public well-being.

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Key Advice

Map of participant (citizen) involvement



Source: Manzini, E. (2015). *Design, when everybody designs: An introduction to design for social innovation*. MIT press.

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Key Advice

Personal field journal instructions

As an essential part of participant observation, write detailed descriptions, reflecting on:

- What objects impress you and/or the people around you?
- What spatial arrangements are worth noting? Include descriptions of sight, sound, smell, touch and taste
- What routes and routines catch your attention?
- Who seems to be taking centre stage particularly?
- Who seems to be staying in the margins?
- For both the central and marginal: what do they do?
- What seems to matter to them? (norms, values, passions)
- What do they say? (keywords, opinions, statements, stories)

For practical and ethical purposes, be sure to:

- Always document your experiences.
- Bring a pen and notebook for journaling during site visits.
- Consider multimedia documentation such as photography, film and audio recording.
- Ask for consent when taking formal interviews, close-up pictures and audio and or video recordings

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Key Advice

Overview & Planning Sheet for Teams

- **Go** to places relevant to the project. Spend time actively taking part in the daily life at the location.
    - Who will go where and when?

- **Gather** insights of the experiences of relevant actors such as inhabitants, users of the space and regulators of the location. Include your own experiences, as well as those of the “voiceless” (those who may have been unseen so far).
    - Who are/could be relevant actors?

- **Keep a journal** to document observations and insights. Consider bringing a phone, camera and/or audio recorder as well.
    - What materials do we bring?

- **Ask for consent** before taking close-up pictures and recordings.
    - Do we have consent forms?

- **Reflect regularly** with your team on insights and opportunities.
    - When do we reflect?

- **Organise** actors who are willing to participate in collaborative action.
    - Who have we identified so far?

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V. References

Emerson, R., R. Fretz & L. Shaw (2011). Writing ethnographic fieldnotes. Second Edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Manzini, E. (2015). Design, When Everybody Designs. An Introduction to Design for Social Innovation. Cambridge: The MIT Press.

Verloo, N. (2020). Chapter 3: Urban Ethnography and Participant Observations: Studying the City From Within. In: Verloo, N., & Bertolini, L. (Eds.). (2020). Seeing the City: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Study of the Urban. Amsterdam University Press.

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