Design Thinking as a Participatory Approach

Subtitle: Empowering people with transnational biographies

In short

This method adapts the design thinking process to a participatory approach based on the principle of "Nothing About Us Without Us". It ensures that people affected by issues of diversity and discrimination are not only included, but also actively participate in shaping discussions and outcomes. Such participation is particularly important in times of democratic challenges – democracy depends on inclusive dialogue, representation and civic engagement. Empowerment here means equipping young people with the tools, knowledge and self-confidence to stand up for themselves and their communities. The approach was presented and further developed in the context of a German-Turkish MethodLab. In the context of German-Turkish youth exchanges, this approach creates space to explore different perspectives on democracy, critically examine issues such as polarisation, discrimination and low youth participation, and jointly develop strategies for action.
This description of the method was developed as part of the project "Navigating Democratic Challenges – Civic Education in German-Turkish Youth Exchange", a collaboration between the German-Turkish Youth Bridge (DTJB), Arbeitskreis deutscher Bildungsstätten (AdB) e.V. and Toy Gençlik Derneği (TOY).

Time required: 4 to 6 hours

Target group/minimum age:

Group size: max. 12

Materials required: Flipchart pen, flipchart, coloured cards for noting down ideas, materials for attaching these cards

Author/organisation: Gamze Keklik, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg

The method is suitable for the following modules
(X) Diversity
(X) Transformation

Keywords
(X) Empowerment
(X) Power relations
(X) Future
Further keywords: International encounter, intercultural learning

Learning objectives / what skills will participants acquire:
From the participants' perspective, the objectives of this participatory approach to strengthening personal responsibility in Turkish-German exchange are:

Gefördert durch die bpb: Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung
Co-funded by the European Union

- Strengthening democratic participation: promoting the active engagement of young people in social life and decision-making processes.
- Promoting mutual understanding: improving intercultural dialogue through the exchange of perspectives on democracy, inclusion and identity.
- Questioning stereotypes and discrimination: promoting critical reflection on prejudices and systemic inequalities.
- Social cohesion: Creating a space for young people to work together to tackle common challenges and develop inclusive solutions.

Learning content / which thematic priorities are set:

- Non-competitive group processes
- Design thinking

Description of the process

This method follows an adapted design thinking process to promote self-determination among young people and democratic engagement in German-Turkish exchange. Participants actively work together to develop solutions to challenges related to diversity, inclusion and discrimination.

1. Empathy – exchange of life experiences

- Begin with storytelling exercises, personal reflections, or dialogue circles in which participants share their experiences with discrimination, stereotypes, and social barriers.
- Encourage active listening to build trust and understanding between German and Turkish participants.
- Use methods such as empathic interviews or role-playing to deepen the connection to different perspectives.

2. Define – identify core problems

- In small groups, participants discuss common themes from the empathy phase and summarise them.
- Use visual mapping techniques (e.g. mind maps, problem trees) to define key challenges such as barriers to integration, gaps in political participation or stereotypes in the media.
- Formulate challenges as "How could we ...?" questions to encourage solution-oriented thinking.

3. Idea generation – brainstorming solutions

- Encourage participants to develop as many ideas as possible, with a focus on inclusive and creative solutions.
- Use brainstorming techniques such as "Crazy 8s" (quick idea sketches) or World Café (rotating discussions) (see descriptions below).
- Prioritise solutions that are feasible, community-oriented and realistic in the context of youth exchange.

4. Prototype & test – putting ideas into practice

- Participants develop small initiatives such as awareness campaigns, community dialogues or social media projects.

- Facilitate rapid prototyping by enabling teams to create drafts, scripts or pilot versions of their solutions.
- Encourage real-world testing, followed by peer feedback sessions to refine and improve the initiatives.

This practical, participatory approach ensures that solutions are shaped by young people's voices, promoting democratic action, intercultural understanding and real impact. By participating in this process, participants not only discuss challenges but also actively contribute to meaningful social change.

Variants:
One-day version: This variant allows sufficient time for all five phases of design thinking: empathy, definition, ideation, prototyping and testing. Participants can create prototypes in smaller groups (e.g. role-play scenarios, visual solutions or workshops) and test them with each other, enabling detailed feedback and thorough reflection.

5. Evaluation, reflection and consolidation of results:
The moderators pose two evaluation questions to the plenary, which should be discussed either in the plenary or in small groups, depending on the size of the group.
1. How can we ensure that all voices, especially those of marginalised communities, are heard and valued equally in our discussions and decision-making processes?
2. How can we translate the ideas and solutions we have developed into concrete measures that bring about lasting change and empower all those involved?
In the plenary version, the moderators collect the comments on a pinboard, while in the small group version, the small groups then present their key discussion results to the plenary.

Note

This method enables participants to share their life experiences, define challenges and develop solutions together.
Given the diverse backgrounds of the young people in the exchange context, it is important to take the different contexts of the participants seriously and to take language barriers into account. It must also be ensured that all activities are inclusive and equally accessible to all participants. The moderator should give clear instructions and encourage open communication to ensure that every participant has a chance to speak. It is important to tailor the content to the specific context of each group while promoting a respectful learning environment.
As a moderator, it is crucial for the success of the method to create a safe and inclusive environment in which all voices are heard.
Design thinking processes are particularly suitable for achieving concrete results in a short period of time and in individual units, and for laying the foundations for further work.

Additional material (images, links, worksheets, toolbox, etc.):

References:

- von Unger, H. (2014). Partizipative Ansätze. In: Partizipative Forschung. Springer VS, Wiesbaden. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-658-01290-8_2
- https://designthinking.ideo.com (letzter Zugriff: 06.03.2025)
- Grots, A., Pratschke, M. Design Thinking — Kreativität als Methode. Thexis 26, 18–23 (2009). https://doi.org/10.1007/s11621-009-0027-4
- Koh, J.H.L., Chai, C.S., Wong, B., Hong, HY. (2015). Design Thinking and Education. In: Design Thinking for Education. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-444-3_1

Other methods mentioned:

Crazy 8 is a quick method for individuals or groups to generate eight ideas per participant in eight minutes. This method is particularly useful when the goal is to quickly gather a variety of ideas and build on them. Crazy 8 is also very suitable as a warm-up exercise, see: https://kreativitätstechniken.info/methode/crazy-8/ :

World Cafe is a structured discussion process for large groups to discuss a specific topic in a relaxed, café-like environment. Participants divide into small groups at different tables to discuss a series of questions in several rounds. After each round, participants move to a new table and take the insights from the previous discussion with them. A moderator helps to integrate the new ideas. This method promotes collective knowledge sharing and is used for problem solving, strategy development or collaborative learning, see: https://theworldcafe.com/key-concepts-resources/world-cafe-method/

License

(X) CC BY SA // Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International Public Licence (CC BY SA 4.0). Information: https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/deed.de
Gamze Keklik, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg