University of Dundee

Citizen Science Projects (MOOC) 1.10

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Tool in focus: EMPATHY TIMELINE

Why is it helpful?

A little empathy can go a long way. This is important when you are exploring environmental issues where there are different perspectives, experiences of impacts, and opinions.

It can be difficult to understand other people's concerns. For example, air quality is a big issue for people living with an illness such as asthma, who need to manage their condition by minimising their exposure to polluted air. Noise pollution can cause distress for families with young children and shift workers, and it can cause late-night problems in tourist areas of a city.

Doing an Empathy Timeline activity can help us better understand the issue at hand. It also helps us to look at both sides of a problem and our role in it.

Description

This method helps to unpack an environmental issue. We all can become fixed in our own personal viewpoints; this approach allows people to think about (and sometimes challenge) their own perceptions. The empathy timeline supports people in talking about the ways that they are affected by a shared issue e.g. noise levels in a street, but also the ways that they contribute to

solving it. This approach facilitates community building by bringing people together to discuss shared problems, and consider them in a way that they maybe haven't done before.

Key Question

How were you affected by the problem, and how did you contribute to it?

Time needed

30 minutes

Who should be included?

Facilitators and community members

Number of people required

1 - ∞ (2-20 people max recommended if it is the facilitator/community runs the session for the first time). Participants will be divided into groups of 3-6 people.

Resources needed

A1 sheet of paper (or canvas provided), markers, shapes, and icon cut-outs (sample shapes provided), sticker dots, scissors, glue.

How to prepare?

Find a space with a few tables and chairs where people affected or interested by the same issue can sit comfortably for at least an hour. Having enough room to be able to give each group a bit of space is important too.

Print the timeline worksheet, you can find it in the additional materials section at the end of this article. Or, if using an A1 sheet of paper, draw two parallel lines horizontally across each sheet. At the ends of both lines, mark out a unit of time, e.g. 24-hour day or a year.

Cut out different icons or images related to the issue at hand. Include some abstract shapes too, adding anything that might spark creative thought. We have provided a link to some examples at the bottom of this step.

Steps:

1. Split into small groups (no more than 6 people in each) and fill in the timelines using the materials provided.

2. Ask everyone to focus on the top line first, which represents the ways that you have been affected by the shared problem in the timeline decided. Ask everyone to consider what they encountered throughout the day in relation to the issue, specifying that they include positive things as well as negatives. Use the markers, shapes and icon cut-outs for this.
3. Switch to the second timeline, asking everyone to repeat the process to represent how their own actions might have contributed to the issue in that timeline, and map out when and what they have done. Use the markers, shapes and icon cut-outs for this.
4. Once the groups have populated the timeline with all their activities, ask all the participants to use green and red sticker dots to identify which things they consider to be positive, and which negative.
5. Ask each group to share with each other, maybe having them self-select a representative to make a quick presentation, paying particular attention to the discussions and insights.
6. Document the activity by photographing the completed worksheets, they can be great reference points to come back to during and at the end of your project activities.

##Let us know your thoughts!

Did you try this activity out? If so, please let us know how it went and what you learned. Do you have any tips for others who want to use this tool?

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The Empathy Timeline was first created by the Making Sense project, the original tool can be found in (Citizen Sensing: A Toolkit)[https://doi.org/10.20933/100001112]. It has been used under the Creative Commons license CC BY-SA.