



Handbook of Youth Citizen Social Science

Working with Young People and the
Local Community for Social Change



YouCount
Youth Citizen Science

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4 Communication in Youth Citizen Social Science

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As we explained in [Chapter 1](#), dialogue is a key pillar in youth citizen social science inextricably linked to the research process and its ethical dimension. This chapter is about how communication developed in practice, highlighting key learnings. As in the other chapters of this handbook, our aim is not to provide recipes nor one-size fits all approaches, but to inspire you when you're wondering where to place your communication efforts and resources in a youth citizen social science project.

Our short answer? Everywhere! (at the micro, meso and macro levels -see [Figure 3, in Chapter 1](#)). But as we hope to convey, it is more about shining the light on the communication process through reflexive practices, than about putting in additional resources through trendy or expensive communication tools and products, which must not be an end, but adopted as a result and in the service of the wider dialogue developing in the project (see also [Chapter 3](#) on documentation).

Bringing Scientific and Local Knowledge Together

At the **micro level**, communication is dialogical and in person. It happens at the core of the research process, where “professional” researchers and young citizen scientists engage in dialogue among themselves within the research teams and then reach out to stakeholders and other community members in Living Labs and Dialogue Forums. [Chapter 3](#) on carrying out a youth citizen social science project, particularly on the co-creative approach to young citizen social science working with young people and engaging stakeholders deals with the micro level. This chapter shines the light on dialogical communication as a way of supporting, enabling and protecting the research process.

Adopting a dialogical approach *does not* require researchers to abandon their scientific expertise. Instead, it can be understood as a both-and approach, wherein scientific and local knowledge are mutually reinforcing, rather than mutually exclusive. A dialogic



approach represents a shift towards a more communicative and collaborative research paradigm, one that recognizes the importance of diverse voices and perspectives in generating insights and solutions to complex issues. It acknowledges that the expertise of researchers, derived from years of rigorous training, can and should interact with the contextual, experiential knowledge held by young (or other) co-researchers in order to generate new knowledge and social innovations that can address the social problem being addressed. *What did we learn from practice?*

A Safe Space for Meaningful Dialogue

Creating the right conditions – both physically and socially – was identified as a communicative key to success by both researchers and youth.

The Physical Space – The Foundation for Dialogue

The first step is to find a physical space to meet in, preferably somewhere the young citizen social scientists know and feel comfortable. If possible, let the young people choose the location for the first few meetings. Once social barriers start coming down, you can be more creative in how, when and where you meet. Try to find natural learning environments like schools or universities, where everyone is mentally primed to learn and share knowledge from the get-go.

Building Trust and Rapport

A second step is to develop trust and rapport within the project group, in the You-Count case, between the young citizen social scientists and the academic researchers. Developing trust with youth requires a nuanced approach to dialogue and communication. Without it, meaningful co-creation is impossible. Firstly, it is crucial to listen actively, valuing the youths' perspectives, and creating a space in which their voices are heard and respected. Secondly, it is important to encourage open and honest discussions, validating young people's experiences, ideas, and concerns. Thirdly, work on fostering transparent communication by explaining decisions, processes, and objectives clearly, ensuring the young co-researchers feel included and informed. Flexibility is key here – researchers must be willing to adapt plans based on the young co-researchers' input, showing that youths' contributions genuinely influence decision-making and outcomes.

Ditch the Lingo!

Another important thing for researchers to keep in mind is to ditch the lingo! Being part of a research project can be a daunting experience for citizens, especially when they are a young person, and it is easy to become overwhelmed by scientific terms and concepts. Using informal and even personal language is essential to enable understanding and active participation. By adapting their language and carrying themselves in an informal way, researchers help in creating an inclusive environment where everyone feels comfortable participating.



How to create safe spaces for meaningful dialogue

- **Don't be afraid to be personal.**
 - Sharing an anecdote or some of your interests outside of academia can remind participants that you are really just a normal person working as a researcher.
 - This helps to create an informal and egalitarian environment.
- **Don't underestimate team-building activities and ice-breaker games.**
 - They help to lower social barriers, especially at the beginning of the co-creative process.
- **Share meals.**
 - Having lunch together during meetings is a great way to cultivate trust and a tangible sense of equality and togetherness within the project group.



Be Open to Different Ways of Doing Things

Engaging in meaningful dialogic communication means that all participants must step out of their comfort zone: young citizen scientists learn how to engage in scientific inquiry and researchers adapt to the youths' lives and ways of doing. Seeking inspiration from participatory design processes is essential to open up new perspectives and to reach tacit and latent knowledge. Here are some different ways of engaging in dialogue with young people as citizen social scientists during the research process.

Open Formats and Posters for Data Collections



Figure 14. Youth Citizen Scientists' open field notes in the Danish Case

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

The posters were a great way to follow up on and document our previous conversations. They work as reminders for everyone. When we come back and see the posters on the walls, we can read about what we talked about last time.

– Young person from YouCount Denmark

When doing data collecting through, for example, participatory observations, recording sessions or taking field notes in a book is not necessarily the best way to proceed, because young people can feel watched or pushed to say things they believe is what researchers want to hear. Instead it can bring positive notions to work with open formats where the youths' words are noted onto a big piece of paper, so they can see that their thoughts are recognized.

Furthermore, the open formats create a tangible object that the youths can build upon, helping them remember earlier conversations or interactions.

Stimulating reflection – using the local environment as a dialogue tool

When working with youth it can be an advantage to invite them out into the local neighbourhood and talk about the challenges in the places where they experience them. Especially in educational settings where youth are often used to being inside of the classroom. When we facilitate a setting where youths can investigate the local environment, and are able to have a dialogue around their experiences, it has the potential to stimulate reflection and create new conversations about the area. A lot of the cases have used the opportunity to go outside and let the young co-researchers show and tell, either through photos or making them interact directly with the environment.

This has brought other perspectives to the table. One thing is all the tacit knowledge that is hidden in certain areas in a neighbourhood that only the youths carry, another thing is that the local environment can exploit new possibilities as well.

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

The field trip, when we cycled around Sydhavn and engaged with locals, was the highlight of the whole YouCount project. It was interesting to interact with different people in a divided area, as they brought new perspectives to the table.” – Focus group interview, Valdemar, co-researcher.

In sum, going outside, rather than relying solely on indoor settings, such as classrooms or universities is a good way to stimulate knowledge sharing. Learning is also fueled by trying out creative research tools like open field notes for data collection, walk-alongs with policymakers in the park instead of conducting interviews and or movies or photo exhibitions to communicate with local stakeholders and other young people in the community,

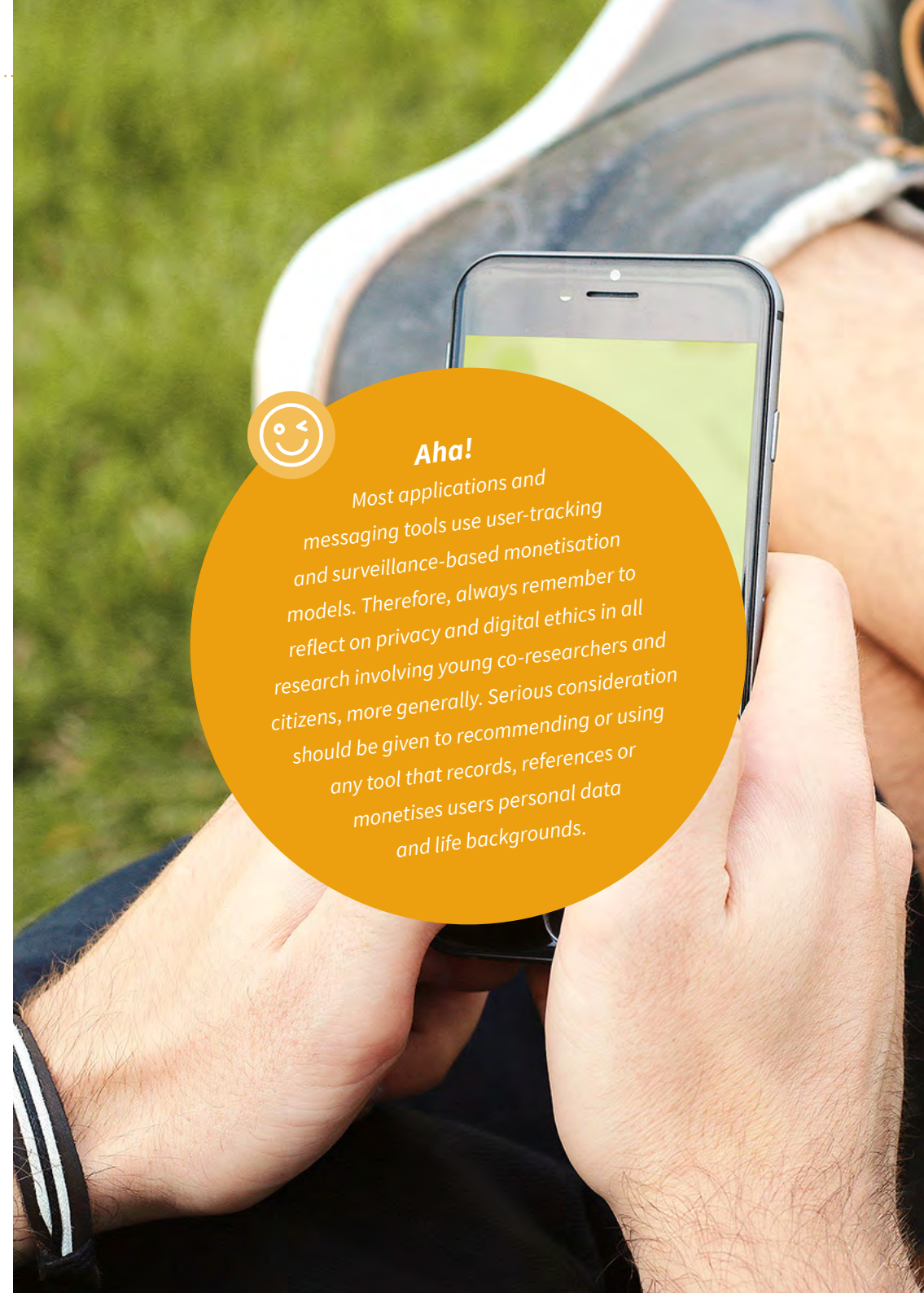
Combine In-Person and Virtual Dialogic Communication Wisely

While in-person dialogue, where participants can pick up on body language and non-verbal cues, fosters deeper understanding and helps in building personal connections and trust among participants, dialogue can also take place in virtual settings. Using collaborative digital tools, like white boards, in different stages of the research process for gamification and co-learning can work well. Do not, however, overestimate the potential and usefulness of these tools. Digital fatigue exists, even among younger generations!



Aha!

Most applications and messaging tools use user-tracking and surveillance-based monetisation models. Therefore, always remember to reflect on privacy and digital ethics in all research involving young co-researchers and citizens, more generally. Serious consideration should be given to recommending or using any tool that records, references or monetises users personal data and life backgrounds.





YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

The digital meetings felt more like lectures, and our participation felt more passive than during the in-person meetings. We were encouraged to be active and engaged, but it was difficult during online sessions.
 – Young person from YouCount Sweden

The choice between in-person and virtual meetings depends on the specific needs and goals of the research project and the activity in question, as well as the preferences of the participants. A hybrid approach combining both formats strategically to leverage the benefits of both, was adopted in YouCount. Don't forget that some participants may have no access to or capabilities to use technological tools. In these cases, analogue posters, pamphlets, and brochures can replace social media posts and online collaborative tools.



Key Takeaways

- **Cultivate open and inclusive dialogue.**
 - Actively listen to the concerns and ideas of the young citizen scientists, demonstrating a genuine interest in their perspectives.
 - Ensure that language is respectful, inclusive, and free from judgement, creating a safe space for diverse voices to be heard.
 - Use ice-breaker games and team-building activities to foster a sense of trust and collaboration, creating a safe space for diverse voices to be heard.

- **Empower and encourage active participation.**
 - Actively encourage and empower the young co-researchers to take leadership roles in discussions and decision-making processes.
- **Embrace collaborative and innovative formats.**
 - Use collaborative formats like focus groups, workshops, and co-creation sessions to encourage dialogue, knowledge exchange and mutual understanding.
- **Adapt and iterate as you go.**
 - Be flexible and willing to adapt and iterate the dialogical processes based on feedback and emerging ideas and needs, ensuring a dynamic and responsive approach to communication.
- **Do not prepare overly structured interactions.**
 - Overly structured dialogues may stifle creativity and spontaneous interaction. Ensure that discussion topics and goals emerge through mutual interactions with the co-researchers as part of a shared decision-making process.
- **Facilitate, do not dominate the dialogue.**
 - Refrain from dominating the dialogue or sidelining the voices of young people and stakeholders. Facilitate equal participation and contribution from all parties.



Aha!
 Young citizen scientists are expert facilitators of dialogue with other youths!



RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVE

We always prepared agendas with topics we wanted to discuss, but in the conversations with the young people, unexpected things happened, and we had to set our agendas aside and discuss what the young people wanted to – and needed to – bring up. After each meeting, I went home with a lot of insights as a researcher, but also emotional insights into what it's like to be young in a place like Botkyrka.”
– Researcher from YouCount Sweden

YOUTH PERSPECTIVE

It's easy to talk about social inclusion, but in YouCount, we actually felt included, not just as passive participants but as co-researchers who could affect decision making. The adult researchers tried to listen to us and were open to adapting to what we wanted to discuss.
– Young person from YouCount Sweden

Crazy Eight, Bingo and Pizza - Youth Citizen Social Science in Oslo, Norway
Photo by Sara Plassnig

Widening Participation and Keeping it Dialogic

Hybrid forms of communication at the **meso level** (combining dialogic and one-way communication) must be encouraged in citizen science projects since they offer the potential to widen the participation scope without losing dialogue's transformation potential. At the meso level dialogue cannot have the same intensity as in the micro level, but must try to keep participatory communication's dialogic essence. The meso level can develop in websites and the social media, blog posts, apps, and all types of virtual platforms and meetings, like webinars. Also in books, journals and magazines and in spaces where moment in time dialogues take place, such as conferences and seminars.



Oops!

Time really does fly when you are having fun. Remember to prioritise writing with the young co-researchers while they are still participating in the process, and document everything for future pieces of writing.

The communication team in YouCount took inspiration in Responsible Research Communication (D.5.7: Canto-Farachala et al., 2021) to think about our main communication tools and platforms at the meso level. How can we make them dialogic? This concern was present from the start of the project for some researchers:

RESEARCHERS' PERSPECTIVE

We should adopt a two-way-communicative approach to our use of social media, emphasising the possibilities for engaging different stakeholders in dialogue, and getting their input to the project, rather than viewing social media as just a way of sharing messages and redirecting people to the website. – Researcher, YouCount



One way of incentivizing dialogue is by inviting people to continue a conversation presenting social media posts that already incorporate some sort of dialogue among participants. For example, our “Meet YouCount’s Early Career Researchers!” campaign introduced young co-researchers and asked them to share their view on how science could be more inclusive. Their answers raised much interest since they are young researchers exploring innovative ways of doing research. Also, each issue of the YouCount Newsletter presented young co-researchers reflecting on how they were experiencing their participation in the project.

Webinars are great examples of spaces where all the dimensions of responsible research communication can be considered. In a series of knowledge-sharing webinars conducted by YouCount early in the project we learned important lessons, among them that we needed to use more humour! (D.1.5: Murray et al., 2023)



How young citizen scientists felt from working with researchers.
Visual Capture by Ruth Graham.



Key Takeaways

- **Dialogue in virtual spaces needs facilitation and is costly.**
 - Be ready to commit energy and resources to try to engage participants and keep the dialogue going.
- **Inclusion is difficult to balance.**
 - Be ready to hear that your website is too “simple” (you avoided jargon) and that it is too “academic” (you included some concepts from the literature). You can address this by having two layers: a free, airy, easy to read front page and a backpage with the more technical details of the project.
- **Co-creation is not always realistic.**
 - Choose when and how to include young co-researchers in co-creating the project’s website, social media channels, webinars, and other. Time frames, languages and work overload can act as barriers. Choose wisely to make the most of it for the project and for them.
- **Training in science communication is important.**
 - Do not assume that all researchers have skills in science communication. Plan for training early on to both, engage them in meso level communication activities and to bring “project” and “case” level communication closer.
- **Engaging project participants in communication activities is not easy.**
 - They are already engaged in dialogic communication in their cases and being asked to also do so at the project level can result in a sense of work overload.
 - Design a good way of connecting what is going on in the cases and the project’s communication tools and channels (see blog in the following section).
- **Finding time to engage in writing scientific papers is difficult.**
 - Prioritise writing with young co-researchers
 - Documentation is key for future writing tasks.



Disseminating Information and Findings to Key Audiences

At the **macro level** dialogue is no longer possible and communication adopts a one-way approach. Press releases, speeches, newspaper articles, newsletters and podcasts make up this level. These activities are more likely to develop at the local level and target local audiences.

Other communication tools like blog posts and social media have an inherent dialogical dimension but as mentioned earlier they need an important investment in time and resources to keep them alive. However, they are also important tools to disseminate project results and to bring the voice and “flavour” of the cases to an international audience. Social media can be used to broadcast news, stories, and information about events and publications, to identify new stakeholders and build networks. It is a great way to link up with other projects doing citizen science and citizen social science and to keep updated on their latest developments. In this sense, social media can act as a link between what is happening in the project at the local level and global trends and activities.

Remember that each social network works best with a particular audience and that content can't always be used in the same way in the different channels. Moreover, consider data ethics, ownership/country of origin and effects of user tracking. Most social networks are based on user surveillance and data monetization, and as is well known, can have a wide range of negative effects on participants' mental well-being, especially for younger people.

A great source of content for our social media channels in YouCount was our Blog. It was conceived of as a space to share stories from the project. The ideas for the first posts were devised by the communication team in collaboration with researchers and dealt with general aspects of the project and how we were dealing with them. Later, when the local research teams settled, the stories began flowing more easily and the blog became a logbook that includes interviews with members and stakeholders, chronicles of events taking place in different locations, and the voice of young citizen scientists.



How to write a great post for a research blog:

1. **Think about your audience.**
2. **Write one post per topic.**
3. **Structure your information well.**
4. **Think on an attractive title.**
5. **Provide added value.**
6. **Add multimedia elements, always backed by GDPR rules.**
7. **Synthesize.**
8. **Try to be brief.**
9. **Include hyperlinks.**
10. **Call for interaction.**
11. **Use keywords.**
12. **Check your spelling.**

Note that the most creative and innovative communication activities are taking place at the case level. YouCount featured participatory science fiction films, documentaries, photo exhibitions and museum installations, among others. Take a look at [our Toolkit!](#) Communication tools at the project level must do a good job at making these initiatives known among an international audience.

Last, and by no means least. Citizen Social Science projects need thorough



Aha!

Draw up a “pictures and video” policy and send it to all participating partners so that they are aware that they need informed consent for any pictures they send for newsletters, websites or blog posts. And make sure you are familiar with the specificities regarding under age participants.

documentation, which can be demanding and difficult to follow through. Every time that you share anything in writing, audio or video (or in all at the same time!) you are documenting your project and can go back to these materials for many different purposes. Moreover, disseminating early results on an ongoing basis contributes to your project's commitments to Open Science. (See the subsection on [Documentation in Chapter 3](#)).

FURTHER READING

Canto-Farachala, P., Norvoll, R., Brattbakk, I., & Budryte, P. (2023). Participatory communication and citizen social science: Lessons learned and new ethical and political challenges. *Etica & Politica / Ethics & Politics*, XXV, 2023, 2, pp. 129-151

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*Young citizen scientists met and bonded at the YouCount Consortium Meetings, here in San Sebastian, Spain.
Photo by Nagore Valle.*

