



PARTICIPATION

Unit Overview

The Participation unit is designed to encourage reflection about the meaning of ethical participation and to foster the thinking skills needed to participate responsibly in online communities. Ideally, students will come away from such lessons with a stronger perception of themselves as *citizens* of various communities in which they participate online and offline—and with a greater sense of the responsibilities their citizenship entails.

Key Questions

- In online contexts where communities can rapidly form, and just as rapidly disintegrate, how should norms of behavior be established, maintained, and respected?
- What are your roles and responsibilities in the online communities in which you participate?
- How can a person's conduct in an online community affect other participants and the community as a whole?

We define participation broadly, as the ways in which people conduct themselves online. Participation online can include signing an online petition, commenting on a friend's status update on Facebook, uploading an original video to YouTube, contributing to an ongoing blog, etc.

Online spaces provide young people with positive opportunities to assume new roles, learn new skills, and collaborate with others to address urgent social problems. At the same time, opportunities to participate in harmful or counterproductive ways abound online, such as through hate speech, grieving, trolling, cyberbullying, and other forms of misconduct that can harm both individuals and whole communities.

Ethical participation is more likely when youth perceive themselves as citizens, and are reflective about the norms that exist in “good” communities, their own roles and responsibilities, and the potential impact of their actions on others.



Ethical Thinking Skills

Ethical thinking skills highlighted in this unit:

- **Perspective-taking**—consideration of the views of different stakeholders in a given community, including underrepresented groups, and of the ‘commons’ as a whole.
- Reflection on **roles and responsibilities** as members of various communities.
- Consideration of the potential **benefits or harms to the community** of different courses of action online. And making careful decisions about when and how to participate and to support others' participation within a community.

New Media Literacies

New media literacies highlighted in this unit:

- In online communities, youth engage in **play**—the capacity to experiment with one’s surroundings as a form of problem-solving.
- Young people can also develop and demonstrate the skill of **performance**—the ability to adopt alternative identities for the purpose of improvisation and discovery. In an online, multiplayer game, a youth can assume a leadership role in a guild and perhaps discover and nurture leadership skills.
- Also relevant is **simulation**—the ability to interpret and construct dynamic models of real-world processes. Games provide tools for players to model and manage both human and material resources, thereby simulating decision-making processes in fields such as government and business.
- Success with these skills can be facilitated if a young person possesses the skill of **negotiation**—the ability to travel across diverse communities, discerning and respecting multiple perspectives, and grasping and following alternative norms.

Unit Lessons

The Participation unit contains the following lessons:

- **Our Space, Our Norms**—Discussing sensitive issues such as identity, privacy, trust, ownership and authorship, and group norms can be difficult; it is essential to establish and maintain a culture that allows youth to feel safe and comfortable enough to discuss these issues. In this lesson, teacher and students work together to create a safe space and a shared set of norms and guidelines for participating in discussions about the issues raised in this casebook. We encourage your class to return to this opening lesson any time you feel that new classroom



norms have developed or old norms have changed, so that your class guidelines can be updated accordingly. Designed by Erin Reilly (Project NML).

- **Divided Nations**—This lesson is designed to help students reflect on how to best deal with the conflicts that can arise between novice and veteran members in online communities. Students begin with an activity to familiarize them with the roles of "novice" and "veteran" in which they brainstorm what it means to be in one of these roles in a variety of offline communities. Students then work in groups, examining web pages, forum posts and user statistics from YouthUN, a fictional online model-UN community that is in decline because of conflicts between veterans and novices. Based on these documents, students explain what has gone wrong at YouthUN and suggest changes that the various stakeholders (novices, veterans, and website managers) can make that will help the community as a whole. Designed by Sam Gilbert (GoodPlay).
- **Flamers, Lurkers, Mentors**—In this lesson, students are asked to explore the ways in which they can participate in online communities. They will be asked to respond to various ethical dilemmas, and then justify their responses. Through these dilemmas, they will consider the different impacts that choosing to participate or not participate may have, and the responsibilities implied by taking part in online communities. The goals are to help students arrive at a greater understanding of how some actions that appear passive may actually be participatory. Finally, they will discuss how they choose to participate or not participate in situations in their own lives. Designed by Madeline Flourish Klink (Project NML).
- **Taking Perspectives: Views from Youth**—Ethical participation starts with the development of specific ethical thinking skills. One of these skills is perspective-taking—the ability to assume the points of view of a variety of actors in a given situation. In this lesson, students are introduced to perspective-taking through reading a series of quotations from “digital youth” who use perspective-taking when making decisions online. By understanding the perspectives of others, these youth make informed decisions about the best courses of action when faced with ethical dilemmas. Designed by Andrea Flores (GoodPlay).
- **“I Thought You Should Know”: Perspective-Taking**—This lesson builds on the “Taking Perspectives” lesson; here, students are asked to take on the perspectives of characters featured in an episode from the television show “Friday Night Lights.” In this episode, a popular cheerleader, Lyla, is the target of a mean-spirited website created by a fellow cheerleader, Brittany. The clips reveal the perspectives of the main individuals affected—Lyla; her father; Brittany; Brittany’s father; and Tami, the school guidance counselor. Students are asked to consider the perspectives of each character and three components of perspective-taking: intent



of the perpetrator; consequences of the cyberbullying for all characters; and emotional responses to the incident. Overall, this activity demonstrates the role and value of perspective-taking in online decision making. By striving to understand the perspectives of others, youth can make more informed and responsible decisions online. Designed by Andrea Flores (GoodPlay).