



POPULAR CULTURE AND CIVIC IMAGINATION TOOLKIT

Welcome to our toolkit! Here we tap the stories, TV shows, games, movies and folk stories we love (and love to hate) to activate our imaginations as we work through the social challenges our communities face. Our playful easy to do activities engage popular culture, imagination and issues of collective concern, tackling questions like: How do we want to live with one another? How do we resolve conflicts in our community? How do we know what's fair for us and for others? How do we work together to solve big problems?

The toolkit is intended for a broad age group - parents and children (5+), peer-groups, those working in educational settings and really anyone interested in watching, remixing, creating, and having fun with popular culture!

Our number one goal here is to help adults and children (and others) to have fun around shared media experiences, moving us beyond the negative focus on “screen time” to a more generative mode of co-creating our culture. These activities are shaped by concepts such as perspective taking and emotional intelligence, but more broadly, designed to help young people to think about how they live in communities and physical spaces with other people, how they work together to achieve a social order that is fair to all, how they might learn to appreciate each other's different perspectives and experiences, and how they might look at their physical surroundings, both places and things, in new, even magical, ways. We also see these activities as an childhood entry into media literacy (understood not as a school subject but as part of our everyday lives as media consumers and fans.)

Each activity in the toolkit can be completed as a stand-alone unit. Unless otherwise noted, these activities here emerged from brainstorming sessions with the members of the Civic Paths research group.





ACTIVATE THE IMAGINATION

ICEBREAKER

NUTS AND BOLTS

Brief Description: This activity is for those who want to warm up and get creative with popular culture before diving into the other activities included in this toolkit.

Recommended Age Range: 5+

Participants: 2-6 participants (or groups of 2-6 participants)

Duration: 30-45 minutes

Materials Needed and Space Requirements:

In Person: A pen and colored pencils can be enough. Print out the character cards included, otherwise just use pieces of paper.

Internet-Friendly Option: Synchronous video conferencing platform (Facetime, Zoom, Skype, etc)

Learning Opportunity: This activity activates the imagination through popular culture.



ACTIVATE THE IMAGINATION

ICEBREAKER

INSTRUCTIONS

Identify

Each participant identifies 1 character from popular culture stories (movies, shows, books). They draw them on the print out cards linked with this activity. The drawing could be a sketch of the character. It could also be a drawing of something that evokes them (a symbol, color, shape etc.).

Share

Once each sketch is complete, everyone should introduce their character. Describe them, their skills, and personality. Then share why you chose them.

Imagine

Now start to imagine what your character might like to share about themselves. What is your character's favorite color? What would they like to have for lunch? What would they share if they would meet another character here today?

Connect

Imagine that all the characters decide to go on a trip together. Take turns responding to these prompts, adding to the story each time: Where would they go? What would they take with them? What would they do there? What would they bring back? Make sure every participant has a chance to respond to the questions! Use this exercise as a starting point to let your imagination roam as you explore your characters more.

Role playing welcome!



WHO TELLS THE STORY?

NUTS AND BOLTS

Brief Description: In this activity participants re-tell well known stories to work through how differing points of view change the narrative.

Recommended Age Range: 5+

Participants: 2-6 participants (or groups of 2-6 participants)

Duration: 30 minutes

Materials Needed and Space Requirements:

In Person: A pen and colored pencils can be enough.

Internet-Friendly Option: Synchronous video conferencing platform (Facetime, Zoom, Skype, etc)

Learning Opportunity: This activity taps popular culture to support perspective shifting and encourages participants to explore a situation from different vantage points.



WHO TELLS THE STORY?

INSTRUCTIONS

Identify

Identify a familiar popular culture story (content world) that all participants know. Identify the protagonists in this story as it is represented in the source text.

Imagine

Now, imagine what this story might look like from the point of view of other characters, who are not the protagonists. They could be the antagonists or the just other characters in the story. So, for example, imagine the story of Little Red Riding Hood as told from the point of view of the wolf or Goldilocks as told from the perspective of one of the bears or a bird looking in through the window. Some questions you might want to consider:

How would the story change if it was told from this other character's perspective?

What might motivate this other character to take action and change the story?

How could the story become more fair if told from a different character's point of view?

Share

Write/perform/draw/sculpt the story as told from the perspective of this other character.

Discuss the ways this new narrative might change the ways you feel about the original author's choices in terms of how to tell that story.





LET'S MAKE
IT
FAIR

NUTS AND BOLTS

Brief Description: In this activity participants work through a story based conflict to identify outcomes that could be more fair to everyone involved.

Recommended Age Range: 5+

Participants: 2-6 participants (or groups of 2-6 participants)

Duration: 30 minutes (in addition to time spent watching media content together)

Materials Needed and Space Requirements:

In Person: A pen and colored pencils can be enough.

Internet-Friendly Option: Synchronous video conferencing platform (Facetime, Zoom, Skype, etc)

Learning Opportunity: This activity taps popular culture to support perspective shifting and encourages participants to explore a situation from different vantage points.





LET'S MAKE
IT
FAIR

INSTRUCTIONS

Watch

Choose a familiar popular culture story (content world).
Optional: set up a time to watch the story/episode together.

Identify

Identify a particular moment of conflict in the story. What happens? Who is involved and why? What are the core conflicts within an individual episode and within the series as a whole? How are these conflicts resolved? Or, what allowed them to persist?

Imagine

Imagine that you could change the outcome of this conflict/situation to make it more fair to all involved. How would you change it? Who would be involved? Would you need to bring in other characters to help? Why?

Share

Collaborate to create a way to tell the new story through performance (puppets, acting).





**CHARACTERS.
PROBLEMS.
SOLUTIONS**

NUTS AND BOLTS

Brief Description: Fictional characters come together to tackle real world problems in this activity.

Recommended Age Range: 5+

Participants: 2-6 participants (or groups of 2-6 participants)

Duration: 45 minutes (in addition to time spent watching media content together)

Materials Needed and Space Requirements:

In Person: A pen and colored pencils can be enough.

Internet-Friendly Option: Synchronous video conferencing platform (Facetime, Zoom, Skype, etc)

Learning Opportunity: This activity recognizes diversity as crucial to effective decision making.



CHARACTERS. PROBLEMS. SOLUTIONS

INSTRUCTIONS

Identify

Each participant identifies a familiar character from a popular culture story (content world) that they like. Each participant should identify a different character! Spend a few minutes jotting down what you know about the character - who are they, what is important to them, how do they behave? Then draw them on the included print out cards. The drawing could be a sketch of the character. It could also be a drawing of something that evokes them (a symbol, color, shape etc.).

Share

Once each sketch is complete, everyone should introduce their character. Describe them, their skills, and personality. Then share why you chose them. Set the characters aside for a minute.

Identify

Now have each participant identify a problem or issue that they currently see in their family, neighborhood, school or community. This could be a local concern or a large-scale global one, but it should be something they care about deeply.

Each participant introduces their issue. Once everyone shares, identify one that you want to continue to work with in this activity. You can either make this decision randomly (by rolling a dice) or by voting.

Imagine

Now imagine that all of your characters are called upon to respond to the issue or problem that you identified. How would the characters work together to solve this problem? What would they do? What could they accomplish?

Share

Work together to create a drawing that represents their adventure!



MAGIC YOUR DAY

NUTS AND BOLTS

created by Paulina Lanz and Sulafa Zidani

Brief Description: Everyday objects can have magical powers when we use our imagination. This is an activity where you can create a collage giving magic powers to objects that inspire you. You'll bring together your everyday life with your imagination. The time and materials used are very flexible. This can be a page in your journal, a piece in your gallery, or part of an ongoing scrapbook.

Recommended Age Range: 5+ (younger children may need support/prompting)

Participants: individual participation or in teams

Duration: A one-time activity takes 40-60 minutes. You will be building a scrapbook and can decide if you want to create one page, a daily page, a weekly compilation, a fortnight's worth or even a month-long commitment. You can repeat or extend this activity as long as you'd like. You can start a new collection, or build on previous one –if you're feeling adventurous, you can build on your somebody else's!

Materials Needed and Space Requirements:

In Person: A pen and paper can be enough. You can add a lot on top of that: magazine or newspaper cutouts, print your own images, or any other crafts! You can look around you for inspiration. You can use what's around you, like glue, glitter, paint, and other colors. Make your magic pop out by adding origami figures, crepe paper, foamy, pipe cleaners, pasta, tree leaves, or anything you like.

Internet-Friendly Option: You can magic your day on any creative software where you can draw (laptop, phone or tablet). Feel free to bring-in your photo-editing skills and Internet memes!

Learning Opportunity: In this activity, you will draw a connection between everyday activities, popular culture, and your imagination. You'll be working on a scrapbook. Yes, where cut and paste go beyond "cmd + c" followed by "cmd + v". There is a collection of activities, each one will fill up a page in your scrapbook. You can decide if you want to create one page, a daily page, a weekly compilation, a fortnight's worth or even a month-long commitment.



MAGIC YOUR DAY

INSTRUCTIONS

Browse

Set a 1-minute timer. Look around you for one minute. Feel free to look around. Once the timer goes off, close your eyes. What objects do you remember? Was there something that caught your eye? An item in the room that stuck with you or that reminded you of something else? Now that you're consciously aware of your environment, it is time to start your media collection (drawings, cutouts, photographs, crafts). As you're looking through your material think about that you'd like to add magic to.

Time to craft

On your page, you'll make a collage from your collection. You can include characters that you saw on TV, things you ate, activities you enjoyed during the day- if there is one you disliked, you can add it too! Feel free to cut-out, color-in, or even bring other elements you have lying around to the page.

Magic your object

From the items in your collection, you should pick one object to which you'd like to give magical powers to; remember, one object, one power. Ready? You can write down the object you chose and the power it now has.

Share

Magic is only magical when it is shared. Take turns sharing your story with the other participants. Maybe you'll see that everything around you is magical! Here are some questions you can ask each other:

- Can you give an example of how your magical object can be used?
- Does the magical object impact other items or characters in your scrapbook story?
- How can your object help you or others?
- How can your object have a positive impact on your community?
- What unfair situation in the world could your object change?
- How do you feel after doing this activity?
- If you look at the room around you, does it seem different to you in any way?



MAGIC YOUR DAY

INSTRUCTIONS - CONTINUED

Note

We suggest you always start with Browsing, all the subsequent activities can be switched around. Experiment with it!

Pro-tip

Did you know you can Share before and after magicking your object?

Complementary activities

If you want to keep adding pages or tiles to your collage collection, these are some suggestions for different types of stories in your magic scrapbook:

- Make a collage of a scene where the magical object was used.
- Write a story where the magical object was used.
- Create a story where an item of clothing has magical powers.
- Center your story around a magical food item.
- What if it is not a magical object, but several objects that help you create a magic potion? Write down the recipe including a list of ingredients and the power that each one adds. Create a collage of your magic potion.
- Pick an object that would give you the same superpower as a character from a show/movie. How would you use it in your life? Make a collage based on that story.
- Think about someone (or something) that you usually cannot communicate with, how can your magical object help you communicate with them? (This could be a person, group, animal, plants, inanimate objects, etc.) Make a collage based on that story.
- Remixing magical objects: Identify a problem (or conflict/ or unfair situation) in your community (or family/around you/that you care about). What is the problem? How could your magical object(s) or magic potion(s) help with this problem?



LET'S COMPARE STORIES

NUTS AND BOLTS

created by Christopher Persaud

Brief Description: This activity invites cross-generational dialogue through popular culture fandom. Adults, youth, and children explore similarities and differences between contemporary and older stories. This helps start conversation about changing media representations across different time periods and genres. TV shows often tell us something about how people thought about a social or cultural topic during the time period that the show was made. Today, we might not use certain words or consider certain things to be entertaining that people 50, 30, or even 10 years ago thought were okay to do. This can be a good way to start a conversation about intergenerational differences regarding media representation, social justice issues, and other important topics with the child.

Recommended Age Range: 5+ (younger children may need support/prompting)

Participants: 2 (one adult and one youth/child)

Duration: 30 minutes (in addition to time spent watching media content together, one TV show episode is likely around 20 minutes long)

Materials Needed and Space Requirements:

In Person: A pen and colored pencils can be enough.

Internet-Friendly Option: Synchronous video conferencing platform (Facetime, Zoom, Skype, etc)

Learning Opportunity: This activity invites participants to engage stories and genres as they explore how narratives and representations evolve over time.



LET'S COMPARE STORIES

INSTRUCTIONS

Watch

Older participant: Choose an episode of a show from your childhood. Watch this together with your child/youth. As you watch the show together, explain why you enjoyed it when you were younger.

Younger participant: Choose an episode current show that you like and that connects somehow to the first show. To find this connection, think about how the show looks, the characters it includes, the main story, or anything else that you notice. Watch the show together with the older participant/adult.

Compare and Chat

Once you have watched both shows, take a moment to reflect and think about how they compare. Depending on the age of the participants, you could take a few minutes to note down your thoughts and/or you could make a quick drawing comparing the two shows as well.

Next, take a few minutes to chat about the following:

What did you notice about the two shows?

How were they similar?

How were they different? (split a piece of paper down the middle and track your observations)

Did your shows have a moral or lesson? Note how these have changed (or not) in the two shows.

Imagine

Take a few minutes to imagine how you might combine these two shows to create a new show. What would you keep from each show? What would you definitely not include and why? You can continue to expand on this activity by enacting a scene from your 'new' show using props and toys that you have on hand.



IMAGINED CITY GREETINGS

NUTS AND BOLTS

created by Mehitabel Glenhaber

Brief Description: Envision a fictional city by sending messages imagining your travels there.

Recommended Age Range: 10+

Participants: 2-3

Duration: A few minutes every few days as you receive the postcard from your post-card pal

Materials Needed and Space Requirements:

In Person: You will need: 1. A blank postcard, or postcard shaped piece of paper and 2. A friend or family member who lives in another city

Internet-Friendly Option: Phone with camera and ability to send photos as messages/attachments to other participants

Learning Opportunity: This activity expands your capacity to imagine possibilities for city life, and connect with people in other cities across a distance.





IMAGINED CITY GREETINGS

INSTRUCTIONS

Imagine

Imagine that you have just moved to an imaginary city, and that you are sending postcards to someone about your travels.

First, choose what city you have moved to. It can be anywhere in the universe - maybe it's a city that already exists, or maybe it's one that doesn't yet. It could be a city from a pop culture story you like! What would it be like to actually live an ordinary day in Gotham or Metropolis, or Minas Tirith?

Create a Postcard

Second, choose a special place in this city that you have visited and were excited by. On the front of the postcard, draw this place. It can be any place you like, or, if you are having trouble picking, you can choose one randomly from the places list below.

Third, on the front of the postcard, write to your friend about this place you have visited. What is it like to be in this city as a visitor? What is it like to live in this city? How is it like your home, and how is it different? What are you excited to tell your friend about? Use as many senses in your writing as you can to make the experience of the city come alive for someone who has never been there before.

Share

Finally, mail the postcard to your friend! And wait for your friend to write back their own postcard about the imaginary city they've moved to.



IMAGINED CITY GREETINGS

INSTRUCTIONS – CONTINUED

Internet Friendly Option

Follow the steps as above, but instead of mailing a postcard, pretend you're texting or emailing a friend pictures of your travels. Draw a picture of something you saw, and then text/email it to a friend with a message about what you saw. If you're feeling particularly dedicated, you could even start a travel blog!

Example Places:

- Public park
- Library
- Monument
- Government building
- Historic site
- Museum
- Downtown square
- Neighborhood
- Public artwork
- Transit hub
- School
- Sports stadium

Repeat as many times as you wish!





**DRAW YOUR
CHARACTER HERE**

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ABOUT US



Civic Paths:

Based at the University of Southern California and founded by Henry Jenkins, Civic Paths explores continuities between online participatory culture and civic engagement through outreach, creative work, research, and academic inquiry. With low entry barriers, participatory culture-based communities often encourage online participation and expression even as they promote expression, awareness, mentorship, and skill training. Premised on a dynamic understanding of civic life, we analyze how participatory culture interactions encourage young people to create, discuss and organize. Civic Paths, which started as a small, informal group of graduate students interested in the ties between online participatory culture/popular media fandom and civic engagement in 2009, has grown into an established group. We hold weekly meetings that allow current Civic Paths members to work on collective projects that shift from semester to semester while maintaining a network of support for each other's individual research.

<http://civicpaths.uscannenberg.org/>

Civic Imagination Project

The Civic Imagination Project taps the civic imagination (our collective vision for what a better tomorrow might look like) to bridge perceived cultural gaps between diverse communities. Over the last 6 years, our team, based at the University of Southern California, has worked with communities all over the world to develop tools for unlocking the imagination and harnessing unbridled creativity for real world action because we need hope and imagination to mobilize and sustain our collective efforts. Our group believes that to make the world a better place everyone needs to be able to imagine what a better world looks like, even now, especially now.

civicimaginationproject.org

Image by Gerd Altmann from Pixabay (Creative Commons)

