



**POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS
ON CITIZENSHIP
EDUCATION FOR
SUSTAINABLE
EUROPEAN
DEMOCRACY**

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KEY CONCEPTS

- Everyday Democracy
- Critical Consciousness
- Participative Democratic Health
- Creative technological environments



OPPORTUNITIES AND TRENDS

- Greater awareness of the value and rights of non-human beings
- Connection of green agenda to other topics of social justice
- Move towards EU tech sovereignty
- Increased public awareness of risks of undemocratic online media



POLICY IMPLICATIONS

EU

- Relate everyday democratic experiences to democracy at large
- Involve young people in creating EU technological sovereignty
- Involve young people in assessing democratic health
- Promote critical consciousness and agency, in addition to literacy
- Embed civic education into participatory formats
- Go beyond STEM to STEAM, including the arts

NATIONAL POLICY MAKERS

- Bring democracy education into every part of the curriculum
- Train teachers across disciplines to teach democracy

FOR SCHOOLS

- Assess democratic health of own-organisations

FOR EDUCATORS

- Embrace co-creative approaches to civic education

Critical ChangeLab is a Horizon Europe funded project that between 2022-2025 has been developing educational methodologies to build a resilient European democracy, in a context of dramatic geopolitical, social, technological and ecological challenges.

Through experimentation with over 80 groups of young people between the ages of 12 and 18 in over 11 EU countries, the project has developed extensive knowledge about what can work to promote democratic skills, attitudes, dispositions and competences amongst young people.

The European Union as a whole, and its individual member states, are increasingly placing an emphasis on defending democracy from both internal and external actors seeking to undermine it, and building **societal resilience** in a context of geopolitical contestation and planetary polycrisis.

Education has a central role in achieving these objectives, as has been acknowledged by President Von Der Leyen in her political guidelines for the 2024 European Commission. Despite this, Commission studies show that **the education sector in general across Europe has suffered one of the largest drops in investment of all public sectors. Under stress, democratic education and innovative approaches to education risk losing out.**

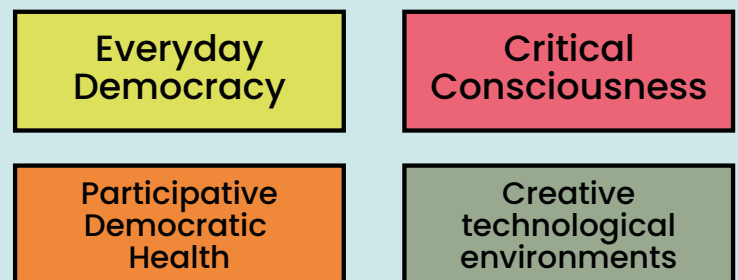
Indeed, development of what EU policy-makers refer to as 'European citizenship education' has to some extent taken a back seat in the most recent years, after a period of comparative prominence from the Paris declaration of 2015 through to the immediate post-Covid pandemic context of 2022.

Overtaken by geopolitical and technological developments and internal divisions, there is currently little political discussion of a coherent and holistic European citizenship education as such, and rather an ad-hoc focus on addressing specific threats. Providing cutting edge insights from practice to update policy developments is therefore urgent.

Underpinning the successful approaches to education for democracy developed through Critical Change Labs are **transformative approaches to the topic of democracy** itself, to **technology**, to the **environment**, to **creativity** and activity, to **citizenship** and politics and the connections between all these topics.

This policy document seeks to explain these approaches and distinguish them from dominant approaches underlying much of policy-making over the previous period, and give recommendations by which policy makers, stakeholders, educators and institutions can reinforce the deep democratic competences amongst young people that will enable them to navigate contemporary dynamics.

The four transformative approaches to democratic education that this document will explain are:



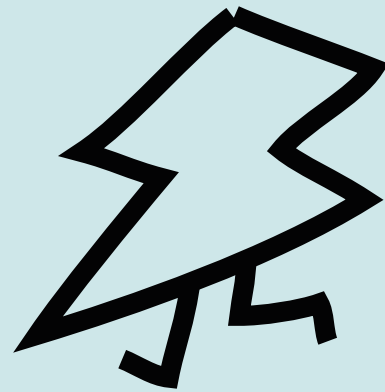
Based on these approaches, 10 policy recommendations for EU and national stakeholders, policy makers, educational institutions and educators are proposed.

The Critical Change Labs model of democratic education for young people has been developed by adapting a model for change in workplaces that was successfully developed and deployed in Norway in the 1990s and has been used globally since in work environments. As such, the method is particularly well suited to

1. overcoming the barriers between vocational, hands-on approaches to education, and more 'academic', theoretical or conceptual approaches to learning
2. encouraging individual and collective competences that can navigate change and uncertainty democratically
3. adaptable use in different contexts and environments, in which vocabularies and articulations of core values, historical understandings, and attitudes towards change may differ

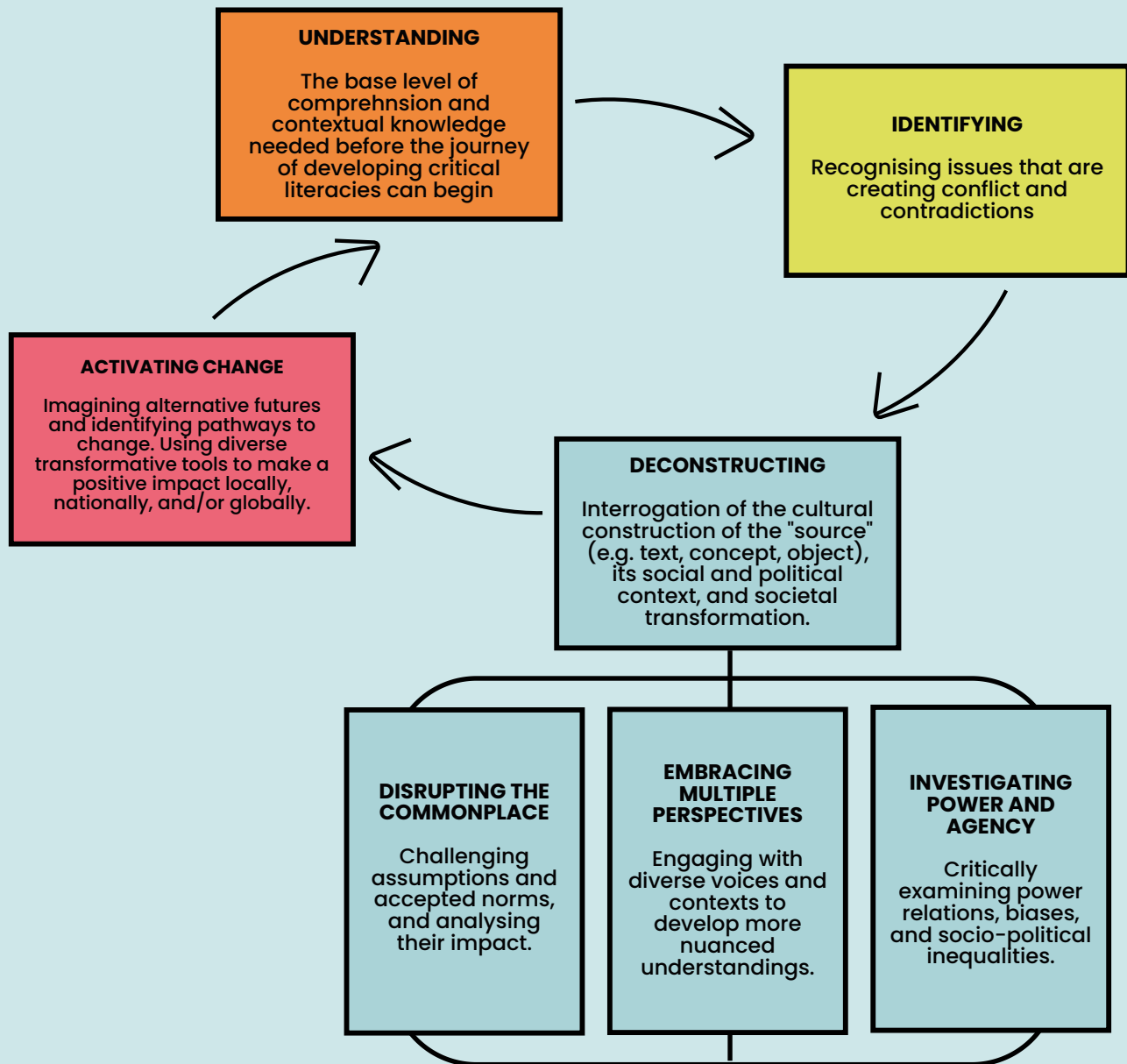
This makes it particularly suitable for addressing education challenges at secondary school level in contemporary Europe in which

1. there is an increasing political divide and breakdown of understanding and solidarity between people with university education and those with more work experience or vocational training
2. the speed and scale of social, economic, environmental and technological change and the risks and uncertainties these produce can lead to disempowerment, anxiety and disenchantment.
3. There are internal political divides inside of the European Union which make 'one size fits all' policy solutions on topics relating to democracy and identity impracticable



The Critical Change Labs model of democratic education finds practical ways of **going beyond understanding** topics, identifying different points of view and verifying factual information to challenging commonplaces. Beyond these aspects of literacy, the model enables learners to identify power dynamics and understand the history of problems as a **basis for finding collective agency** at an achievable and relevant scale.

Instead of coming to learners with a preestablished idea of what they should learn about, the vocabularies they should use to discuss or analyse those issues, or actions they should take, **the Critical Change Labs model starts from working with learners to identify issues of everyday importance to them** (which may range from keeping the school tidy, to experiences of racism, worry about the planet, anxiety about finding jobs, addiction to social media...), and provides activities and formats by which the background, consequences, power dynamics and contradictions in those issues can be brought out, with a view to increasing the autonomy and capacity of learners to take action.



The Critical Change Lab model involves 3 to 5 group sessions, which move through the phases of *onboarding, questioning, analysing, envisioning, acting and reflecting*.



Getting to the core of issues in Barcelona

Gender relations and equality often emerged as a topic of major concern in CCLAB learner groups in response to the prompt 'what are you really fed up about?' Topics such as gender related violence, sexism, feminism, and inequalities were frequently mentioned. In a Barcelona school, learners aged 16-18 through a process of iterative democratic co-creation in several cycles of discussion and voting, deepened the issue of inquiry, to work specifically on affective responsibility, or how to behave in ways that do not harm other people, both individually and collectively. Educators expressed surprise that the CCLABS methodology empowered learners to move beyond the most widely-discussed words, to look at a deeper issue underlying them.



A futures triangle of food quality

In the 'analyse' phase of a CCLAB the learners are prompted to think about the historical origins of the issue they are concerned with, and also with how the issue projects itself into the future. Learners can use the 'futures triangle' the weight of the past, the push of the present and the pull of the future. Some students, for example, analysed poor-quality food, looking at how over past decades pollution, use of pesticides and mass agricultural production has led to decreasing food quality, and thinking about how the future could look if this trend continues, but also what more positive futures could be. In this way, the learners identified the political and commercial interests that would need to be challenged to work towards a better food quality future.

Everyday Democracy

The concept of 'everyday democracy' has been used by scholars and analysts for over two decades, but has yet to be fully adopted by policy makers in general.

At its most fundamental, the idea is that democracy is not only about voting and representation, but about our daily relationships in every social setting, the family, amongst friends, school, the workplace, the high street, or our interactions in hospitals, with government administration or with the police. These interactions increasingly take place not only offline, but also online, often in hybrid online and offline ways.

How democratic these relationships are depends on how much of a say each individual has in the relationship and its direction, the degree to which their interests and identity are respected and taken into account. Everyday democracy does not mean that everyone has an identical role or authority in every social interaction: it does not imply each person should both be doctor and patient, teacher and student, employer and employee, parent and child, or decision-maker and voter. It rather means that social relations should not be based on domination or force, and that the autonomy of each person should be reinforced.

The consequences of adopting an 'everyday democracy' approach in education include the following:

1

Acknowledging that all relationships in a learning setting, whether in a school or in a non-formal or informal context, model and influence attitudes, dispositions and values that learners will carry with them into other parts of their lives. Promoting democratic values in school therefore requires a 'whole school approach'

2

Fostering the capacity to identify power relationships, competing interests and stakeholders, and different ways of addressing imbalances, finding compromises or accepting difference.

3

A capacity of self-awareness amongst learners about their own role, interests and behaviours in relationships with other people and with non-humans and the planet as a whole.

4

Placing an emphasis on reinforcing a sense of responsibility amongst learners and a capacity for collective action to address problems, with the sense that democracy is not only taking place in grand political arenas, but in micro-areas of everyday life.

5

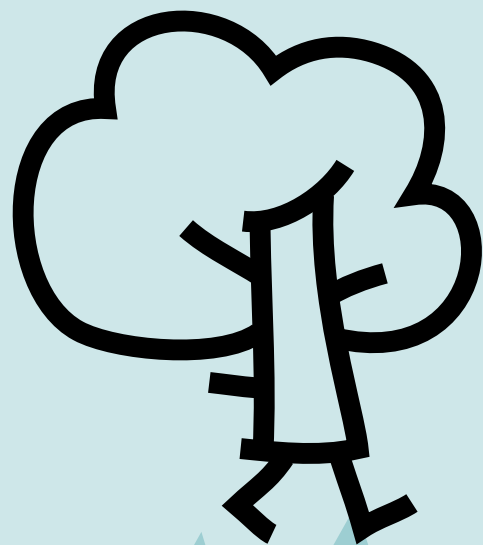
Putting as much emphasis on how learners learn, and how they interact together, as on what factual information they learn.

Critical Consciousness: going beyond 'literacies' to action

Recent education policy has focused on various kinds of 'literacies': media literacy involves being able to access, analyse and evaluate different media; technological and digital literacy involves the ability to use, manage, analyse technology safely, effectively and responsibly; critical literacy involves questioning and examining ideas, interpreting texts and challenging assumptions; futures literacy is the skill of being able to understand the future's role in shaping today, understand that multiple futures are possible. Literacies of these kinds are all important and are developed in the Critical Change Labs model, but the model takes one step further by embedding these literacy abilities in a wider sense of 'critical consciousness'.

Critical Consciousness means the ability to 'perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality', as it was put by one of the forefathers of the approach, the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire. As such, **fostering critical consciousness involves an understanding of power relations**, and a confidence that **each learner can have an influence** in addressing domination, in interrupting injustice and pursuing transformation in both local and more structural ways.

The Critical Change Lab model starts immediately with the critical awareness of the learners, by working with them to identify problems or issues that trouble or bother them, at whatever scale. The entire learning process, in which concepts are explored, literacies are developed, histories are learnt, and alternatives are imagined and designed, is thereby **embedded in a practical process of identifying possibilities for taking action for change**. As such, the model works to expand and develop critical consciousness and responsibility amongst learners.



Participative Democratic Health

Over recent years, scales and indexes for measuring the health of democracies have flourished. Amongst notable indexes are the Varieties of Democracy project, which uses over 500 indicators and allows different kinds of democratic system, and the Democratic Audits of the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance which defines popular rule and political equity as the core of democracy, mediated by values such as participation, representation, accountability, transparency and responsiveness. The most sophisticated of the indexes allow that a fundamental element of democracy can be disagreement about what democracy is and should be, and which values should be most cherished. These audits and indexes are established by experts and scientists, sometimes with input of citizens and civil society living in the countries. They focus on 'democracy at large', on government and governance, albeit they may focus on different scales (from local to regional to national to transnational).



Democracy Health Questionnaire

Critical Change Labs collected and analysed the results of self-assessment democracy health questionnaires distributed amongst thousands of schools and non-formal educational organisations in 10 European countries in 2024. The questionnaire posed questions about democratic values and practices in development of the educational program, access to it and delivery of it as well as about the outcomes and impact on learners. For each question, the head of the institution was required to assess the importance of the issue, and the current attainment towards that objective. As such, the questionnaire prompts educational institutions asking themselves difficult questions about how democratic they are and how much they promote democracy, whilst also allowing them to be clear on their objectives of improvement, and year on year measure progress in becoming more democratic. Analysis of the results of the Democracy Health Questionnaire can be [read here in Policy Brief 1](#)

The 'everyday democracy' approach embedded in the Critical Change Labs model calls for assessing democratic health in two ways which are different from these large-scale indexes. Firstly, democracy is understood to be present or absent in all relationships, which means that **any institution could be democratically audited, including notably schools**. The project has realized a Democratic Health assessment based on a Democracy Health Questionnaire amongst schools, non-formal and informal learning organisations. Secondly, **democracy should involve everyone concerned**, and therefore the establishment of criteria for what democracy is and should be, and the measuring of them, should involve young people notably in co-creation processes, both as an exercise in democratic education and empowerment, but also as a model of the democratic relationship between 'observer' and 'observed'.

Since 2020 the European Commission has issued annual 'Rule of Law' country reports, covering the justice system, the anti-corruption framework, media pluralism and other institutional issues related to checks and balances. Since 2024, the European Commission has been hosting citizens panels on a variety of policy areas. The new Commission since 2024 is developing a 'Democracy Shield' for a more comprehensive approach to reinforcing democracy. The conceptions of everyday democracy and democratic health underlying Critical Change Labs suggest both that **the rule of law reports could potentially be significantly expanded to include much broader areas of democracy, and could involve participatory elements notably including young people**.

Maintaining creative technological environments

While new technologies offer many advantages and chances – including for democracy and civic participation – policy makers and general publics are increasingly aware of the difficulties and risks associated with them, to fundamental democratic principles, and in their social and environmental impacts. Programs in digital literacy and technological literacy seek to give students the tools and knowledge in order to recognize and discuss both opportunities and threats. Going beyond literacy and understanding, Critical Change Labs **promotes learners creatively engaging with technology**, including through arts, maker-labs and programming. Technology should be understood both as something created in cultures and contexts, and therefore not neutral but run through with power relations, interests and potentially discriminations, and also something which contributes to shaping social, political and ecological environments itself. The approach of Critical Change Labs encourages not just passive consumption of technology, or even critically informed consumption, but active participation in shaping digital and technological environments that uphold democratic values.

Creativity, imagination and the arts are crucial elements in this approach, ensuring the capacity for imagining alternatives, bringing out the hidden or unnoticed aspects of contexts, structures and backgrounds, for maintaining a connection with human and non-human bodies, for centering on values and ends as well as means, and for maintaining an ethical connection with others. As such, **Critical Change Labs promotes expanding the educational priorities of Sciences Technology Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) to STEAM, by including Arts.**



From user to maker

Many learners express frustration with 'thinking rather than doing'. CCLABS adopted methodologies which introduced design work, making and hacking into the process of identifying and seeing to address problems, with the methodology and mindset of iterative and collective improvement rather than immediate success. Providing learners with access to 3D printers, coding, laser cutters and sensors amongst other technology, the approach encourages an imaginative approach to how technology currently interacts with other elements in the environment, and experimentation with how it could be repurposed or used to change the future. CCLABS experience often revealed that the instrumental logic of technology is very strong, and learners interacting with it tend to struggle even more to take a critical distance and work together democratically: even more work is required in developing learning formats which promote creative and collaborative work led by learners, in which technology does not set the agenda.

The previous European Commission and European Parliament, between 2019 and 2024, took several initiatives which aimed to reinforce democratic and citizenship education in the European Union.

The **Citizenship Equality Rights and Values** program was created to fund civil society organisations and given a significantly higher budget than previous similar programs, with promoting active citizenship as a key objective. The **Erasmus plus** program has continued to promote student exchange, and from 2022 explicitly added a priority of fostering 'participation in democratic life, common values and civic engagement' to reach the Paris declaration goals. Through Jean Monnet Actions, Erasmus+ teacher academies and other initiatives the program promotes teacher learning and networks. European Citizenship and active citizenship were priorities of the European Solidarity Corps (which provides volunteering opportunities for young people) from 2021 onwards. In its **European Framework on Key Competences for LifeLong Learning**, the Commission includes a citizenship competence. It is to be noted that most of these initiatives reach students and older young people, and not secondary school age children or younger.

Elements of importance to democratic education and citizenship education appeared in other Commission initiatives in the period, most notably with a focus on digital literacy as part of the Digital Decade initiatives and in the Digital Education Action plan, with a focus on sustainability and ecological education emerging from the European Green Deal, and promotion of civic inclusion, sustainability and

beautiful environments embedded in the New European Bauhaus. The 2021 European Council resolution on creating a strategic framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training towards the European Education Area and beyond (2021-2030) (2021/C 66/ 01), acknowledges the importance of education in promoting active and responsible citizenship.

Despite these initiatives, the European Parliament in 2022 called in a resolution on the 'implementation of citizenship education' for more ambition, including notably **development of benchmarks as part of the European Education Area**, a specific strand of CERV on citizenship education, an EU strategy on European Civic and Citizenship Education, the drafting of a recommendation on primary, secondary and tertiary education curricula on EU and civic education for voluntary adoption by member states, and the creation of a permanent structure to support work on EU citizenship education. In the last European Commission little progress was made on any of these areas. In her political guidelines for the new European Commission from 2024-2029, Ursula Von Der Leyen calls for a 'radical step change ... for all types of training and education'. The 2024 Letta Report and the 2024 Draghi Report both emphasise the importance of investment in education for the EU to be prepared for the coming decade. So far in the Commission's work programs there is little sign of a comprehensive vision of citizenship education emerging. Rather, relevant aspects emerge in various Commission initiatives, most notably the Democracy Shield and the Union of Skills.

The **European Democracy Shield** seeks to tackle 'the evolving nature of threats to our democracy and electoral processes'. In her political guidelines, Von Der Leyen mentions threats from 'internal and foreign actors – whether hostile governments or non-state actors', a 'deep change in the information space ... (which) enables new freedoms but also lowers the cost of manipulating information and makes it easier for Russia and others to step up information warfare'. The Shield should work to counter foreign information manipulation, increase situational awareness 'by detecting, analysing and proactively countering disinformation and information manipulation', promote social resilience through digital and media literacy, and creating a European network of fact-checkers. The Democracy Shield is also connected to the Commission's commitment to 'embed citizens' participation across the EU' and reinforce the Citizens Panels.

The results of the Critical Change Labs project would suggest that a comprehensive approach to citizenship education in formal, non-formal and informal settings is a crucial aspect of protecting democracy. Democratic attitudes, dispositions, skills, competences and values are all created and reinforced in relationships in learning environments. Beyond being protected from or detecting themselves manipulated information, learners need to embody democracy in their everyday relationships, through critical consciousness which they bring to bear on all aspects of their lives online and offline, and contributing to being in institutions which are democratically healthy, and by creating technological environments which are open, experimental, non-dominating and non-discriminatory.

The **Union of Skills** 'will ensure that our education and training systems have the right tools to prepare Europeans of all generations for a fast-changing future, through high quality and inclusive education, training and life-long learning'. (Commission Work program 2025, p. 8) The Union of Skills has a particular focus on the STEM subjects.

The results of Critical Change Labs project would suggest that preparing young Europeans for the pace of change in the future requires not only technical skills, but human and relational competences, competences to analyse, deconstruct, identify systemic power structures and injustices, and competences and commitment to act to address these forms of domination and injustice.

The European Union as whole has also come to be more aware of the need to develop **European technological sovereignty**, or a 'comprehensive EU offer in the digital environment' (Commission Work program 2025, p. 10), and recent policy announcements have included European and national funding to develop elements of this.

Critical Change Labs supports the importance of developing digital and technological environments which are not based on domination or exploitation as crucial for creative and emancipatory learning to be able to take place. It sees as a crucial part of developing such environments providing learners with the creative capacities to understanding the technological environments they are in, to act within those environments to change and develop them creatively. Such critical consciousness particularly in the digital sphere requires artistic competences, and therefore Critical Change Labs calls for an extending of the paradigm of STEM competences to include the Arts.

FOR THE
EUROPEAN UNION

1. **Consistently relate macro-democracy to everyday democracy:** the European Union is active both on macro-topics relating to democratic health, such as the integrity of elections, or the rule of law, but also topics which affect people every day such as gender equality or anti-discrimination. The connection between these two scales of democracy is rarely if ever made in political discourse, but it is crucial to ensuring everyone in Europe feels democracy matters to them, and that they can make a difference.
2. Involve young people in **co-designing the criteria to receive EU support for technological development and in evaluating how money is spent:** developing democratic technology which is safe and empowering for young people means involving young people in every stage of the development.
3. **Involve young people through citizens panels in** assessing democratic health and co-designing improvements, by **expanding rule of law reports.**
4. **Go beyond civic literacy to promote critical consciousness and agency for democratic resilience:** in addition to promoting specific forms of literacy and understanding relating to different domains (technology, media, culture etc) promote a holistic set of competences that can identify and find ways to act on power dynamics, competing interests, and forms of oppression across domains.
5. **Embed civic education into participatory formats:** in addition to **promoting youth and other citizens assemblies and panels, reforming the European Citizens Initiative** to ensure it has real follow up, **promoting participative budgeting** and similar tools, the EU should **promote an integral component of citizenship education in each of these exercises**, which builds the capacity of participants to analyse and act on power dynamics and structural elements underlying any issue under deliberation, and have the competences and tools to ensure proper follow up to input they have delivered.
6. In the Union of Skills and European Education Area, **go beyond the STEM paradigm to STEAM** by including arts education as a crucial component for developing the competences required to ensure technological environments are value based, creative, non-dominating and non-discriminatory.

**FOR NATIONAL STAKEHOLDERS AND
EDUCATIONAL POLICY MAKERS**

7. **Bring democracy education into every part of the curriculum:** everyday democracy comes up in all subject areas, from the humanities to sciences to sport. Democracy is best learnt by promoting a critical consciousness and active attitude with regards to any topic which is being investigated or learnt, or activity in school.
8. **Train teachers across disciplines** to have the competence to help learners address political and social topics, reinforcing the agency and responsibility of young people.

**FOR SCHOOLS AND EDUCATIONAL
ORGANISATIONS**

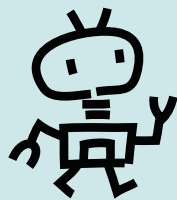
9. **Assess democratic health of own organisations in a participative way:** democracy starts from everyday relationships and environments, and the learning environment is decisive.

FOR EDUCATORS

10. **Embrace co-creative approaches,** building trust with learners to develop capacities of critical consciousness, responsibility and democratic action, both individually and collectively, starting from the everyday lives and concerns of learners themselves.



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