

# MOBILE

# ETHNOGRAPHY



This Citizen Engagement Technique is part of a series that Cities of Service has created to help city leaders work with citizens to solve problems. To learn more and access additional techniques, visit [citiesofservice.org](http://citiesofservice.org).

Mobile Ethnography<sup>1</sup> captures the firsthand experiences of citizens with a particular city service through the use of mobile phones, cameras, or audio recorders.

## BEFORE YOU BEGIN:

Prior to implementing any citizen engagement technique, it is important to set goals and expectations, identify stakeholders, and more. For a checklist of steps you should take before you begin, please visit [citiesofservice.org/techniques](http://citiesofservice.org/techniques).

## HOW TO LEAD A MOBILE ETHNOGRAPHY ACTIVITY:

1. Select an input collection system or tool that allows residents to easily submit data while they interact with the city service. Mobile phones provide many options for input collection. For example, citizens could take photos of their interaction with the city service and email or text them to a single recipient at the city. The city could also develop a mobile app that citizens use to collect data. Whichever system you choose, it should provide a seamless way for the city to analyze citizens' input after data has been collected.
2. Create participant instructions and how-to guides.
3. Meet with citizen participants, either as a group or one-on-one, to explain the purpose of this exercise. Provide participants with detailed instructions on how to record their interaction with the service. If citizens are using their mobile phones, set up a demonstration so that they can practice on their own devices and troubleshoot as necessary. Explain to the citizens how they should turn in their information and how the information will be processed. Explain how long participants have to gather data.
4. Have residents interact with the city service and collect data. At least one city staff member should serve as a point of contact to answer questions and troubleshoot challenges during the data gathering process.
5. Gather staff and partners involved with the mobile ethnography activity to discuss citizen data. Determine key learnings from the gathered data and how those learnings will impact changes and improvements.
6. Share key learnings with the city staff responsible for the service or initiative and, together, make a plan for needed changes.
7. Thank citizens for their participation, explain how their input will be used by the city, and tell them how they can stay up to date on the project's development.



<sup>1</sup>Adapted from *This Is Service Design Thinking* by Marc Stickdorn and Jakob Schneider. (Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2011), 172.

**EXAMPLE:**

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As a signatory to the UN Convention of the Rights of the Child, Boulder, Colorado, works to ensure that everyone under the age of 18 has a voice in the decisions that affect them. They use a style of Mobile Ethnography called Photovoice to engage the city's children in redevelopment and policy decisions.

Boulder's child- and youth-friendly initiative, Growing Up Boulder, used Photovoice when the city was planning for the redevelopment of the Boulder Civic Area — the downtown's most expansive space. Between 2012 and 2014, Growing Up Boulder helped over 200 children from preschool through high school contribute to the planning process.

Growing Up Boulder brought the older students to the Civic Area and gave them red and green frames. Students took photos as they held up the green frames to highlight the areas they liked and red frames to highlight the areas they wanted to see changed. They also brought clipboards so that the students could record their thinking. Back in the classroom, they discussed their findings and identified some of the major ideas to share with the city. For example, the older students really liked the public art and the flowers, and they also expressed a desire for more places to “hang out.”

Growing up Boulder also brought preschool children and their teachers to the Civic Area, and the teachers observed the areas that were receiving the most attention from the students. The teachers took photos of these areas and printed them in black and white. Back in the classroom, they provided these printouts to the children and asked them to draw what they would like to see added or changed.

All of the youth participants were invited to share their ideas at a community engagement event about the Civic Area redevelopment. The drawings from the preschool students were projected on a movie screen. Older students' photos were printed out as high quality posters from the University of Colorado's environmental design school. The posters were displayed around the meeting room, and the students stood by and answered questions about their desires for the Civic Area. Growing Up Boulder summarized all of the students' recommendations and submitted them for inclusion in the Civic Area redesign process.

For guidance on using this and other citizen engagement techniques, or to learn more about customizing solutions for your city, contact Cities of Service at [info@citiesofservice.org](mailto:info@citiesofservice.org).