**Theory of Action, Part I: Where do you come from? Where are you going?**

**Purpose of the Tool**
Whether or not your study group has articulated it, you likely have an implicit rationale for thinking that your group’s innovation project could lead to the outcomes you desire. Surfacing and articulating this underlying rationale or “theory” by creating a Theory of Action diagram can help your study group clarify understandings and expectations, focus on long-term goals, and move from abstract ideas to a concrete action plan. The following tool is designed to help you frame your Theory of Action ahead of creating a more detailed diagram (Theory of Action: Part II).

**Suggested Time Commitment**
You’ll probably need at least an hour to talk through the questions in this tool. This work might move more quickly if you’ve already used the Population—Innovation—Outcome tool but use of that tool is not required in order to create a Theory of Action.

**When & How**
The following tool is meant to be used when you have identified one or more innovation projects that you would like to implement, as well as a target population(s) for the project. Note that this is the first of two tools that should be used in sequence.

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**Example Theory of Action diagram.**

**INQUIRY FOCUS**
How can the introduction of design and maker-centered learning opportunities help 8th grade students to develop a greater sense of empowerment within the context of their everyday lives?

**WHERE WE ARE NOW**
Students do not talk or behave as if they are capable of making changes in the world.

**INNOVATION PROJECT 1**
Lead a workshop to introduce educators at our school to the practice of design thinking.

**INNOVATION PROJECT 2**
Ask teachers to try using the Parts—People—Interactions thinking routine with students.

**INNOVATION PROJECT 3**
Create a school-wide database of examples of high-quality class activities that include design thinking principles.

**LONG-TERM OUTCOME**
Students become empowered to change the world around them through making and design.

“This tool is a great ‘temperature check’ to evaluate programs, including what worked well and what needs improvement.”
~ CCI Educator

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Steps

1. **Articulate your inquiry focus and target population.**
   Write your current inquiry focus at the top of a piece of chart paper. Then, engage in a discussion to make sure that you have group consensus on the target population by describing the people that you hope to impact through your innovation project. Multiple stakeholder groups might be affected by your work but try to zoom in on one group that is your “target” population. Try to be as specific as possible.

2. **Frame your long-term outcome.**
   Now, imagine the desired long-term outcome that you hope to achieve through your innovation project(s)—perhaps these are specific changes, developments, or shifts that you’d like to see enacted for your target population. Think long-term and aspirational, rather than an outcome that is constrained by systems or norms that are part of your current teaching and learning context.

   Write the long-term desired outcome of your group’s work at the bottom of your chart paper. Consider what might be different or what impact you would see if your group’s innovation project is successful. You might have multiple desired outcomes but try to choose one that feels like the main aim of your group’s work.

3. **Identify where you are now.**
   The next step is to articulate, as a study group, an answer to the question: “Where are you now?” Just below the inquiry focus on your diagram, briefly articulate the current situation at your school. What is the problem, challenge, or opportunity that you’ve seen in your school that led you to this inquiry focus?

4. **Articulate your innovation project(s).**
   Last, just under the “where you are now” statement, add one or more innovation projects that you want to try out in your teaching and learning context. Remember, an “innovation project” is used here to mean a new process, framework, instructional activity, tool, etc. that you want to introduce into your teaching and learning context. It is not a general concept or idea like “critical thinking,” “interdisciplinary work,” “blended learning,” or “making learning visible.” It is more specific and action-oriented, such as introducing a specific strategy in class to support students in applying critical thinking skills, starting to use thematic teaching to support interdisciplinary learning, bringing in a specific documentation tool that supports teachers in better understanding what their students are learning, etc.

   In Part II of this tool, your study group will work to frame out the rationale of how you will get from your envisioned innovation project(s) to your desired long-term outcomes.

**Attributions and Additional Resources**
While there are many ways to develop a Theory of Action diagram, the steps used in this tool are adapted from a workshop developed by CCI researcher Andrea Sachdeva, with support and advising from Steve Seidel.
Theory of Action, Part II: Framing a Rationale

Purpose of the Tool
Often times, it's easy to default to accepted norms and approaches in our professional practice. These may be what we ourselves or others have done before, prevailing norms in the systems and contexts in which we work, or what seems like the most straightforward path toward the long-term outcome we want to achieve. This section of the Theory of Action tool asks you to frame out a rationale for why you will do the things you hope to do in your innovation project.

Suggested Time Commitment
You'll probably need at least an hour to talk through the questions in this tool.

When & How
The following conversation protocol is meant to be used when you have identified one or more innovation projects that you would like to implement, as well as a target population(s) for these projects. Note that this is the second of two Theory of Action tools that should be used in sequence. Before using this tool, you should use Theory of Action, Part I.

Example Theory of Action diagram.
Steps

1. Revisit
To start off, look at the Theory of Action diagram you started to create using the Theory of Action, Part I tool. Take a few moments to remind yourselves of the target population, desired long-term outcome, and innovation project(s) you previously articulated as a group.

If your group is planning to divide up and try out multiple innovation projects, you might want to split up into working groups for each innovation project as you engage in the steps that follow.

2. Dissect your innovation project(s) into various components.
Think of whether or not there are any ways that you might break down or “dissect” each of your group’s innovation projects into component parts. This will help you to focus in Step 3. Here are just a few ways that you might think about breaking an innovation project into components:

- **Separate out the stages of implementation.** Consider whether or not there are planned sequential stages in implementing your innovation project that are qualitatively different from each other.
  - *For example, staff training and in-class pilot-testing could be two elements of an innovation project around implementing a new classroom strategy for learners.*

- **Identify stakeholder groups involved in implementation.** Think about how different groups of people might be involved in fundamentally different ways in your innovation project.
  - *For example, if you’re implementing a new STEAM curriculum in your school, the ways that school administrators, classroom teachers, and language support coaches implement this curriculum might be very different. You might even have a group of students taking the lead in such a project, and their participation could look very different to that of adult educators who are involved.*

- **Articulate multiple core activities, if applicable.** Your innovation project might contain diverse core activities that are part of an overall strategy.
  - *For example, if your innovation project is about introducing a specific strategy in class to support students in applying critical thinking skills, core activities might include adapting teaching strategies, trying out new student assessments, and changing the language used in class routines and protocols.*

If applicable, separate out component parts underneath the place where you have articulated your innovation project on your diagram.

3. Frame a rationale (“if this, then that...”).
For the next step, articulate the rationale behind each component of your innovation project(s) using “if this, then that...” statements. The idea is to start with a core activity or action that’s a component of your innovation project, and then to map out your rationale behind that action until you eventually reach the long-term desired outcome that you articulated in the Theory of Action, part I tool.

Here is an example of framing out the rationale for a study group that is hoping to increase learners’ skills in self-expression by using sentence frames that help learners to articulate their thinking:
IF teachers start to use sentence frames in their classrooms, THEN their learners will gain practice in expressing their thoughts. And if that happens, then...

Learners will become more comfortable expressing their thoughts AND Learners will begin to routinize self-expression during class time. And if that happens, then...

Learners will begin expressing themselves independently even when not prompted to do so. And if that happens, then...

Learners will begin expressing themselves both inside and outside of the classroom. And if that happens... ...that will lead to our group's long-term desired outcome of empowering learners to express themselves.

The idea is to show the stepwise cause-and-effect, chain reaction, or order of implementation steps that you expect to occur as you implement your innovation project.

4. Take stock.

With your first-draft Theory of Action diagram assembled, take a step back and consider the following questions:

- **Did your rationale flowchart arrive at your desired outcome?** If not, you might have a lack of alignment between your desired outcome and the innovations you hope to put into place to achieve it.

- **Was there any disagreement within your study group about the innovations you hope to implement, the rationale, or the desired outcome of your work?** If so, now might be a good time to try to gain some consensus and engage in group brainstorming to make sure that all members have an equal voice in how your innovation project is being envisioned and implemented.

- **Did you feel uncomfortable about trying to project forward when you don’t know the future?** That’s okay! This is just an exercise to help you think ahead and gain consensus and alignment within your study group. As you begin to implement the plan laid out in your Theory of Action, you may wish to return to it and revise it periodically using the Theory of Action Tuning Protocol in this Handbook.

- **What other things do you see, notice, or wonder about that you might want to discuss as a group?**

Keep working and tinkering over the weeks to come until you feel that you have a plan that will work well for your group. You might also look to your Theory of Action diagram to start conversations about the type of data and documentation you could collect at different steps of your innovation project, or what you might want to start prototyping or pilot-testing as you begin to move from planning to implementation.

**Attributions and Additional Resources**

While there are many ways to develop a Theory of Action diagram, the steps used in this tool are adapted from a workshop developed by CCI researcher Andrea Sachdeva, with support and advising from Steve Seidel.