

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.

MAKING A PLAN

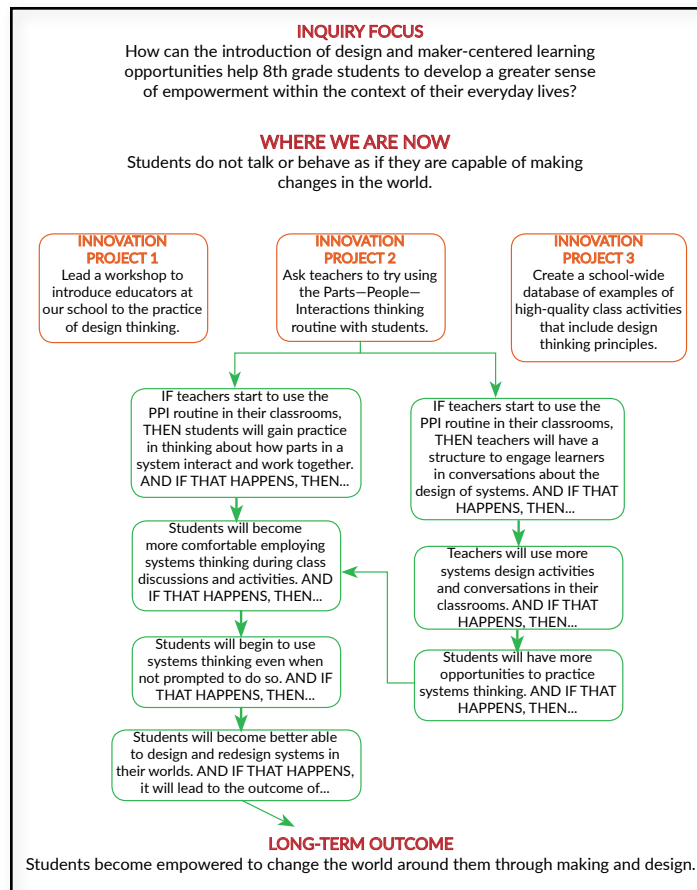
Suggested Time Commitment



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 to express 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.
- **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 Toolkit.
- **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.

Tips for creating a Theory of Action diagram:

- **Work incrementally.** Try not to rush to arrive at your outcome at the bottom of the paper. Think of how you expect your innovation project to play out in a stepwise manner.
- **Don't worry too much about projecting into the future.** Remember that each successive step of your "if this, then that" rationale statements is an assumption or a best guess you'll need to make, even though you can't know for sure how things will play out in your innovation project(s).
- **Make this work for you.** You might have multiple rationale statements, more than one innovation project, loops, branches, color coding, or other elements! Frame out your rationale in whatever way makes most sense for your group and your innovation project(s).