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

MAKING A PLAN

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.
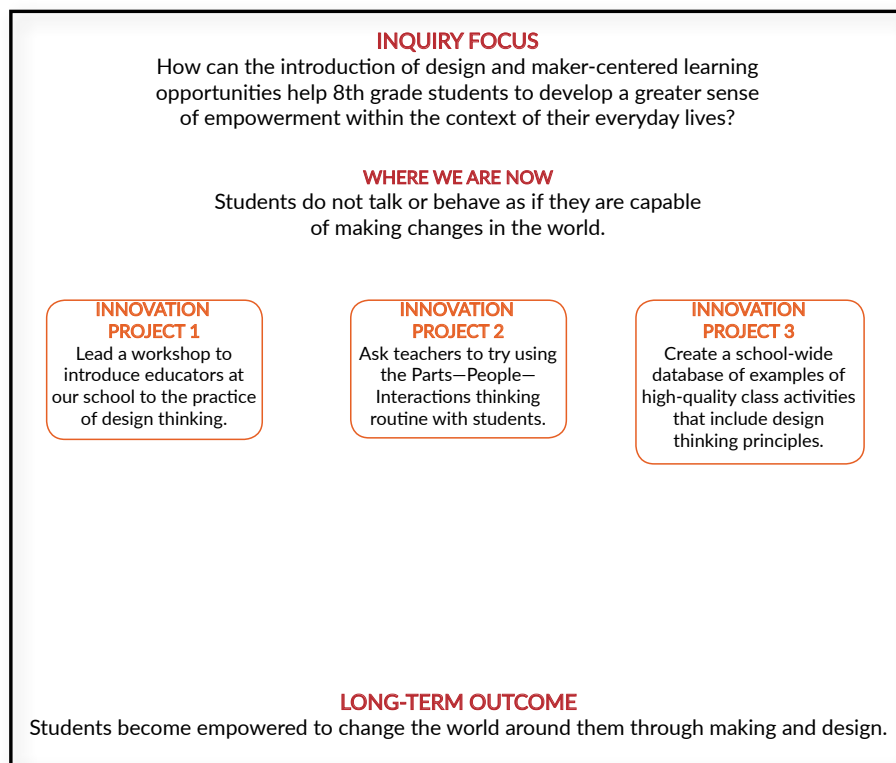
Suggested Time Commitment

60+ min

4 steps

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.

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.

Project Zero
Harvard Graduate School of Education

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Toolkit for Inquiry-Driven Innovation

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.