

# EXPERIMENTING WITH THEORY OF CHANGE FOR INTERCULTURALITY AND MUTUAL LEARNING IN ADULT EDUCATION

Annalisa L. Raymer, Ph.D.<sup>1</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** With a goal of creating conditions wherein college students of adult learning paired with international adult learners form mutual partnerships for educational mentoring, where to begin? How to take into account the contextual factors and priorities of multiple stakeholders in creating academic courses and learning-focused partnerships while staying focused on a core aspiration: that of fostering meaningful relationships across differences of age, class, country of origin, educational attainment, first language and life course position? Theory of change (ToC), a process from the field of evaluation, is a means of mapping out pathways from initial conditions toward desired outcomes. Theory of Change is a powerful heuristic for acknowledging significant aspects of context, bigger picture perspectives, and stakeholder interests. I find particular value and relevancy of ToC as a planning tool for curriculum design, especially in the complex conditions of community-engaged courses. Importantly, mapping a change theory serves as a way to involve stakeholders, creating in this case, a wide-ranging constituency including culture communities, union leaders, campus service workers, academic leaders, administrators, and undergraduate students. With Theory of Change, curriculum design and program development progresses with a clear-eyed embrace of actual circumstances. When informed by such pragmatics, the act of planning toward an aspirational vision gains "robust hopefulness." An actionable characteristic, *robust hopefulness* is handy when returning to a campus years after the demise of its Education Department and setting about to re-establish and make relevant the field of adult education.

**Keywords:** Theory of Change, robust hope, democratic praxis, curriculum mapping

The notion of *robust hope* is a term found in print since the late 1800s, and until recently, most often in religious contexts. Over approximately the past dozen years, the language of hope and robust hopefulness has been increasingly appearing in the educational literature. In this context, robust hope refers to a pragmatic, "multi-faceted contemporary expression of social justice" (Singh & Shrestha, 2006, p. 1). Webb (2013) frames different *pedagogies of hope*, within a more general understanding of hope as "a socially mediated human capacity with varying affective, cognitive, and behavioural dimensions" (p. 397). A picture of hope with some muscle—or least a degree of proactive fitness—begins to emerge. Sawyer and collaborators speak of "the robust hope project," which they link to the work of Henry Giroux and others who connect education, democracy, and hope (Sawyer et al., 2007, p. 229). According to Sawyer and co-authors, "the robust hope project relies on a number of key resources: utopianism, an enhanced vision of democracy, agency, a futures orientation, a research-based approach, sustainability and resilience" (p., 228). Here is a portrayal of robust hope not as a naïve, utopian ideal, but rather a culture of praxis, one with full recognition of deep-seated inequalities even while maintaining a steadfast commitment to teach and cultivate habits, knowledge, and relational action to create more just policies and conditions (See also Singh & Han, 2007; Singh & Sawyer, 2008; McInerney, 2007).

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<sup>1</sup> Cornell University, Adult Learning and Learning-centered Leadership, [alr26@cornell.edu](mailto:alr26@cornell.edu), <http://education.cals.cornell.edu/people/annalisa-l-raymer>. Community Learning and Service Partnerships, CLASP: <http://clasp.education.cornell.edu/>

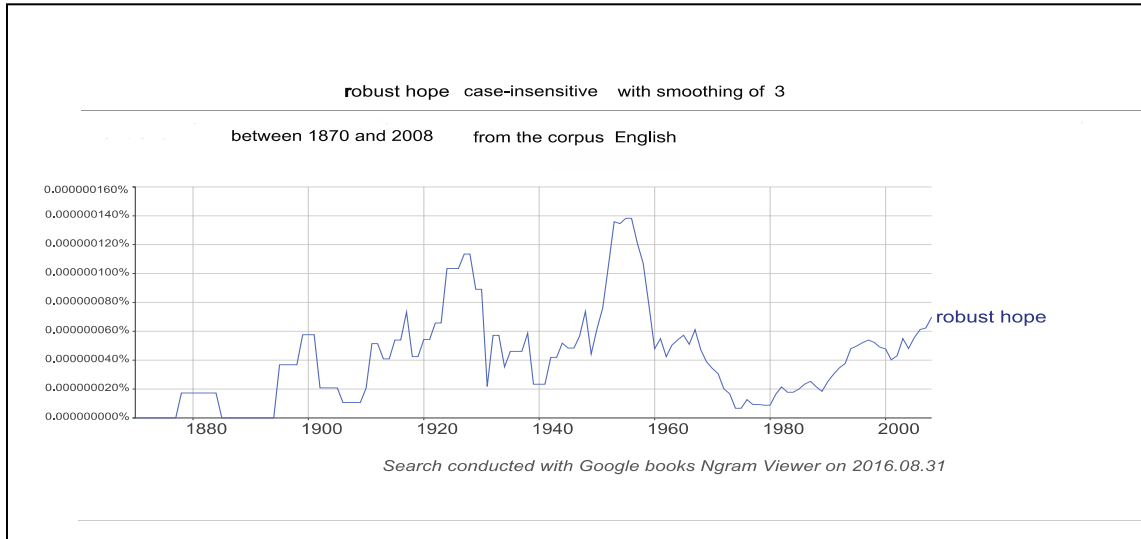


Figure 1. Frequency of term “robust hope” (English corpus), lexical analysis 1870-2008

A good measure of robust hopefulness is both instrumental and expressive when approaching the task of breathing new life back into an adult education program that had long languished after the closure of a university’s department of education nearly a decade before. Even prior to the department’s demise, the population served by the adult education program had shifted away from a primarily local staff who sought literacy and adult basic education. Over time the composition of the employee population became increasingly diverse, with a higher percentage of immigrant service staff members coming to the program for assistance with learning English. Additionally, the nature of the work became more dependent on technology, prompting a growing interest in learning computer productivity. I came into the position with the program on hiatus, and without the benefit of overlapping with anyone who had been previously involved in the operations or related courses, even something as seemingly apparent as a shift in employee interests was a matter of discovery rather than a given.

As described before, robust hope requires more than a can-do spirit; to re-establish a program outside of a department would require researching, identifying stakeholders, initiating relationships, framing priorities, and making plans. A tall order, but one for which the heuristic called Theory of Change (ToC) can provide a means of beginning and going forward.

### **Theory of Change**

A theory of change (ToC) is a tool for developing solutions to complex social problems. A basic ToC explains how a group of early and intermediate accomplishments sets the stage for producing long-range results. A more complete ToC articulates the assumptions about the process through which change will occur and specifies the ways in which all of the required early and intermediate outcomes related to achieving the desired long-term change will be brought about and documented as they occur (Anderson, 2005).

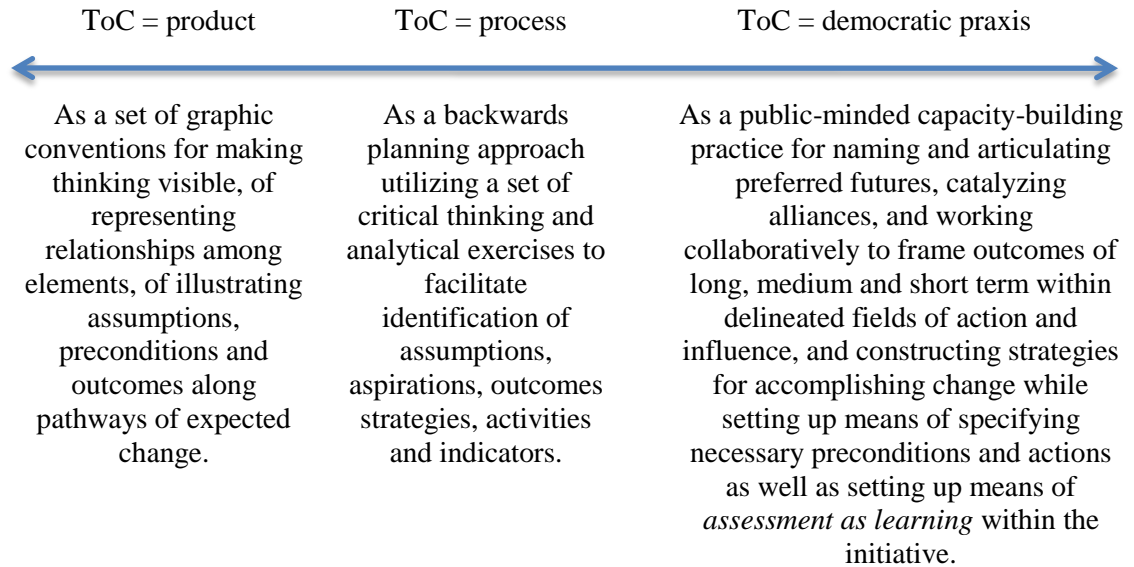
Theory of change is often regarded as both process and product. As a process ToC is a means of mapping out pathways for achieving a desired outcome, the product of which includes graphics and narratives created collectively through a series of critical thinking activities. As such, both the process and visualizations facilitate making visible and accessible the thinking and assumptions that inform plans and program designs. Evaluator Carol Weiss (1995), one of the originators of ToC, noted that the concept of grounding evaluation in theories of change takes for granted that social programs are based on explicit or implicit theories about how and why the program will work (p. 66). In the often-referenced work of Fulbright-Anderson, Connell, and Kubish (1998) on new approaches to evaluating community change, the authors emphasized a theory of change approach to evaluation as “as a systematic and cumulative study of the links between activities, outcomes, and contexts of the initiative” (p. 16). Both definitions, while admirable in their simplicity, suggest an application of change mapping for describing a program. Not as evident are the more anticipatory, predictive and even diagnostic potential usages of theory of change for design. Now that ToC has been in use in multiple settings for several decades, the concept and practice has evolved in multiple directions, and descriptions, both simple and complex, abound.

### **It’s a Bird, It’s a Plane, It’s a Theory of Change!**

A lack of consensus regarding protocols, procedures, and modes of representation further complicates the challenge of definition. Moreover, the multiple views about what a theory of change comprises is matched by a spectrum of purposes ascribed to its use. Accordingly, it is perhaps more accurate to speak of “ToC approaches” rather than a singular understanding of theory of change. Attempts to scan the landscape and make sense of the concept have resulted in a number of review articles in fields in and beyond the evaluation literature, such as public health (Breuer, Lee, De Silva, & Lund 2016) and international development (Stein & Valters, 2012; Vogel, 2012a). Notable in the review by Stein and Valters is their suggestion to think of the purposes for which users employ ToC as positioned along a continuum with, at one end, a view of ToC as a technical tool, and, at the other end, as an avenue by which participants gain “political literacy,” while in the middle of the spectrum they place “ToC thinking” (Stein & Valters, p. 5).

While I admire the conceptual insight this continuum provides, I opt to construct the spectrum a little differently. At one side I place ToC as a product, one with particular emphasis on the various genre for graphically representing relationships and assumptions among elements along pathways of expected change. Next, I position ToC as semi-structured process employing a backwards planning approach or way of thinking. In this mode, users of ToC draw from a variety of critical thinking activities to generate program theory. Finally, at the other far side I situate ToC as a democratic praxis, one which not only serves to generate program theory within a wider consideration of contextual factors, but is explicitly accountable to a vision of public good and practiced with a staunch commitment to collaborative capacity building, direction-setting and ongoing learning.

Borrowing the idea of a continuum then, the one I envision looks like this:



Terminology can be a bit treacherous and is frequently noted as a barrier in ToC literature. A phrase I used in the description of ToC as praxis warrants explanation: “delineated fields of action and influence.” As with systems thinking, change mappers have to set the boundaries of their system. Those aspirations, which the initiators cannot directly or even indirectly influence, are held to be beyond the realm for which the participants can reasonably take responsibility. In some conventions of graphic representation of ToC maps, the ultimate aspiration, while kept in mind as the vision toward which the work being designed strives, is situated above a “line of accountability.” The outcomes below the line of accountability are those initiators regarded as within their field of influence and action.

### **A Theory of Change *Process***

Among multiple descriptions of a ToC as a mapping process certain key elements are common across most, if not all. Primary among these are:

- Situating a long-term aim, sometimes in the service of an articulated preferred future or aspirational ideal, at the top of the map;
- Specifying the existing conditions extant at the start of the process at the bottom of the map; and
- Backwards (or sometimes bi-directional) mapping in tiers to identify what state would need to be accomplished (precondition) in order to achieve the outcome above it. Eventually a path running between the long-term aim and the existing conditions is constructed with short- and medium-term outcomes in between.

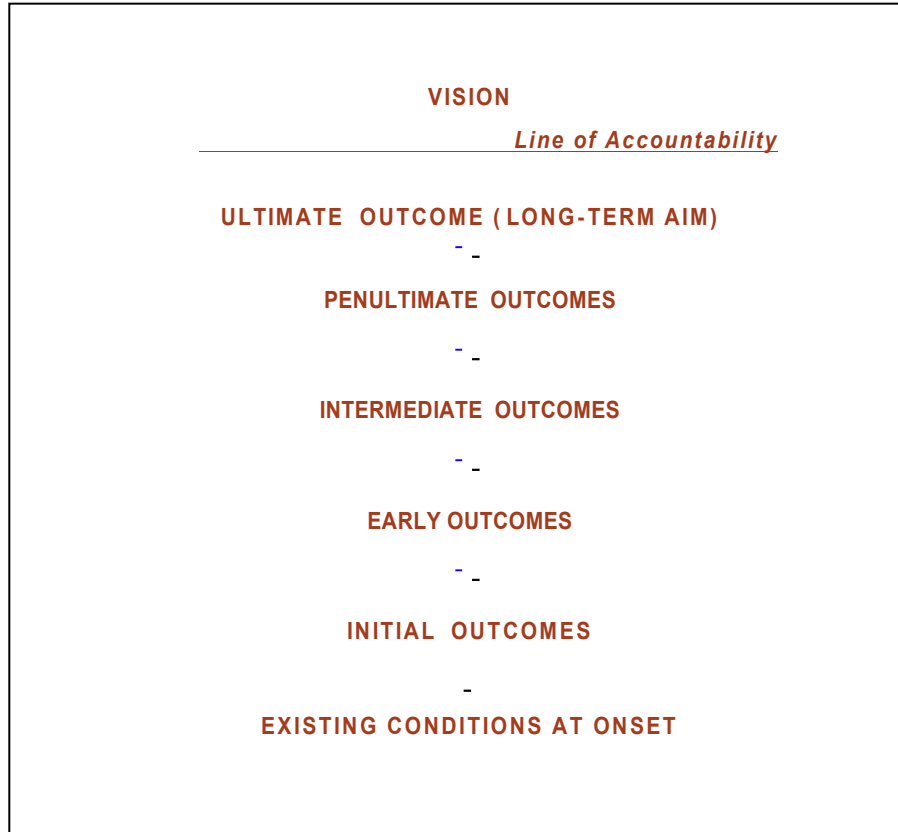
Many descriptions of ToC also include the steps of naming and questioning underlying assumptions and, for each outcome, identifying indicators for determining when an outcome is achieved. The relationship among tiers within the map is such that each row serves as pre-conditions necessary for the outcomes in the row above. In this manner, each element within a tier is simultaneously an outcome of the tier below and a precondition of the tier above. With this in mind, the statements, which comprise these elements, are usually written as if the state has already been achieved (or the action taken). Thus, checking the reasoning of the map can be readily sounded by inserting the phrase “only if” when reading the map downwards from the top, or, if reading upwards from the bottom, by inserting the phrase, “so that.” For example, picture two elements in a change map which state: “Students design weekly teaching plans and write a session debrief and reflection after each weekly Learning Partner meeting. Instructors comment on debriefs and share adult learner feedback” and “Student partner learns about the skills and life stories of her/his adult partner, in part, to tailor teaching strategies for the individual.” With the second statement in the tier beneath the first one, we can read a shorter excerpt of this part of the map downwards with the “only if” insertion:

Students design and facilitate weekly teaching plans and then write a session debrief reflecting after each weekly Learning Partner meeting and assessing the effectiveness of the plan and how the session went.  
ONLY IF Student partners learn about the skills and life stories of their adult partners, in part, to tailor teaching strategies for the individual.

Likewise, we can read the same pair of statements in an upward direction with the “so that” phrase inserted, like this:

Student partners learn about the skills and life stories of their adult partners, in part, to tailor teaching strategies for the individual SO THAT Students design and facilitate weekly teaching plans and then write a session debrief reflecting after each weekly Learning Partner meeting and assessing the effectiveness of the plan and how the session went.

As is apparent, there is a close connection between the process and the visual representation. While space constraints preclude the inclusion of a full ToC schema, the most basic infrastructure of the conceptual mapping is easy to visualize, as illustrated in Figure 2.

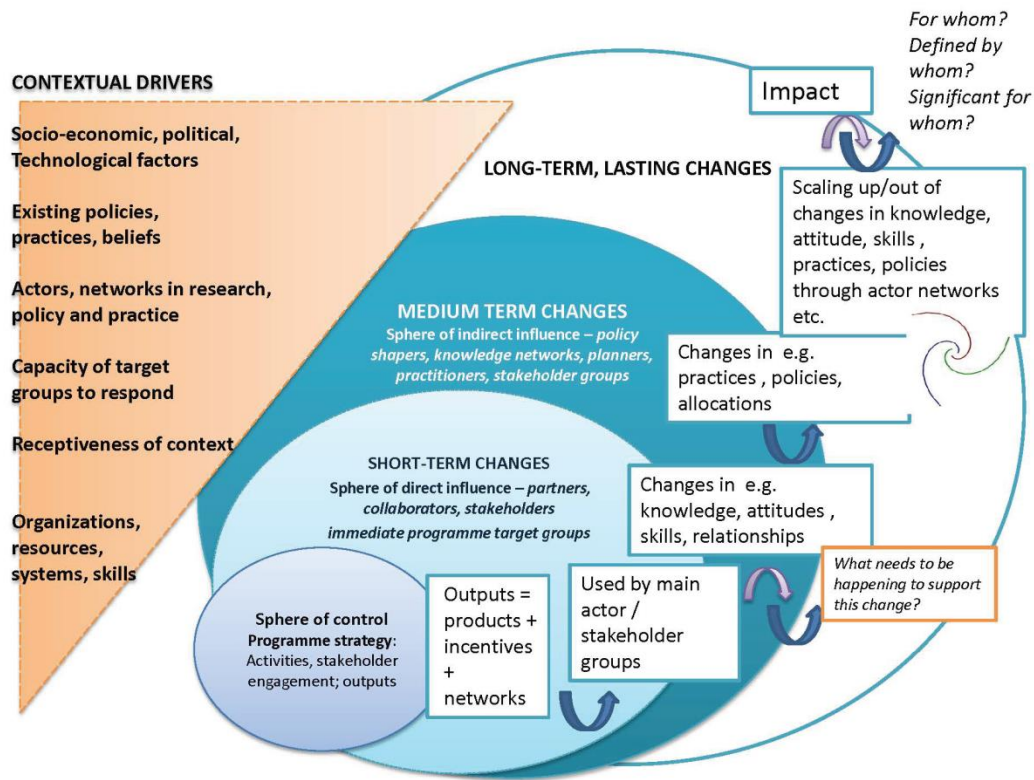


Modified after Anderson, 2006, p. 20

*Figure 2.* Simple schematic of Theory of Change

Less easy to capture is the sense of scale. A mapping process can be used for a single project, for a multi-site program, for a national policy, or an international initiative. Within whichever unit attention is directed, the process entails, as the simple graphic above suggests, a chain of cumulative impact. Vogel (2012b), in her guide to working with ToC for research projects, provides a good illustration, presented here on the following page (Figure 3). Not only does Vogel’s illustration provide a sense of decreasing proximity in relation to increasing impact, the graphic includes some of the contextual factors as well. This representation begins to convey in a snapshot the potential of ToC for developing robust hopefulness by starting with those things the initiators can most readily control and expanding outward to areas of less direct influence but greater lasting change.

In her guide to working with ToC for research projects, Vogel provides a very good illustration (titled, “Visual Illustration of the Main Elements to Consider in a Theory of Change Analysis,” p. 6). Not only does Vogel’s illustration provide a sense of decreasing proximity in relation to increasing impact, the representation conveys, in a snapshot, the potential of ToC for developing robust hopefulness by starting with those things the initiators can most readily control and expanding outward to areas of less direct influence but greater lasting change.



Adapted from Vogel, 2012(b); Morton, 2012; Montague, 2011. Used by permission.  
 Figure 3. Visual illustration of elements to consider in a Theory of Change

To further illustrate how this approach can be employed in the service of robust hopefulness by one coming into an unknown situation to rally allies and make plans, I transition now to give a first person account of my entry into the “post-department” milieu of our university. I begin with a brief history of the twenty-six year old adult education program for service employees at Cornell University, the Community Learning and Service Partnership, CLASP. As will become evident, the relationship between CLASP and the academic education courses in adult learning offered at Cornell are closely interconnected.

### **The Community Learning and Service Partnership, CLASP**

Begun in 1990, Cornell’s adult education program, the Community Learning and Service Partnership celebrated its silver (25<sup>th</sup>) anniversary in 2015. Five years previously, in marking the 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, Ruth Bonous, the founder of CLASP, sketched a brief history. Bonous described how Cornell received very modest federal funds to further adult literacy, after conferring with the director of the local literacy agency,

It became clear to me that those in need of literacy services were present, and yet invisible to those of us at Cornell. They were the Cornell employees who provide the most basic and essential services to the University: housekeepers, food service workers, custodians, and

groundskeepers. At the time Cornell had excellent continuing education courses available for most of its employees. However, the level of the courses and course meeting times were not compatible for the group just mentioned.

I met with Cornell management, including human resources, and with the United Auto Workers Union that represented these employees. Both groups supported beginning a literacy program. With the support of the UAW, Cornell management agreed to allow the employees in the program to meet with literacy tutors during paid work time. This agreement was, and is, crucial to the program because many employees have childcare responsibilities, hold a second job, or live at such a distance from campus that after work schooling is not feasible. (Bonous, 2010, pp. 2-3)

Thus the origins of the Community Learning and Service Partnership entailed community input, union and management support and a lecturer, Bonous, committed to service learning. While much has changed since then, that CLASP and the affiliated academic courses continue is a testament not to a campus-wide awareness of the program and courses, but rather to the deep commitment on the part of a stalwart minority who are familiar with the academic courses and the adult education opportunity for service employees. After the initial federal grant, the university's central Office of Human Resources assumed the program costs, viewing CLASP as an avenue of educational growth for a population of not served by other university professional development offerings. With a mutually agreeable arrangement, the Education Department in the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences welcomed the opportunity to become the academic home of the adult learning courses and the CLASP program when the College of Human Ecology closed its Field and International Study Program in 1997.

In a surprising turn of events, Cornell began dismantling its Education Department a dozen years later, with the departmental closure completed by 2009. Once a flag bearer for Adult Education and home to the journal, *Adult Education Quarterly*, names of Cornell education faculty familiar to those in the Adult Education field include Rosemary Caffarella, Arthur (Butch) Wilson, and J. David Deshler. Faculty remaining at the time of closure either found places in other departments, at other institutions, or retired.

Here, then, was the challenge—to:

1. Investigate and define the best “fit” between CLASP mission and our contemporary Cornell context.
2. Seek clarity for CLASP programming priorities given the updated information uncovered
3. Redesign the courses to both facilitate student access and achieve the intended aims.



This challenge eventually led to a series of three stakeholder convenings and the construction of not one but three interlocking theory of change maps: one for the student experience, one for the employee experience, and one future-looking map for program directions and opportunities to bring into being or be ready to recognize.

### **Sample of Outgrowths from Collective Mapping**

Out of the mapping convening, a dual theme of particular interest to members of the Commission on International Adult Education emerged: interculturality and mutual learning. In recognition of the shift in the employee population to a larger percentage of immigrants, a couple of threads arose. With respect to students, we saw that we needed to equip students with awareness and tools for being respectfully interested in others' experiences, perspectives and cultural practices. With respect to adult learners, we saw that we needed to provide the employees with student Learning Partners who were better trained to effectively mentor language learners.

The mapping exercise thus led to framing specific learning outcomes for students, which, in turn, suggested learning activities for achieving those aims. For example, one learning outcome reads: "Examine roadblocks to intercultural communication and practice strategies for mitigating barriers through role-playing techniques for transforming situations of bullying, disrespect or cultural faux pas." Toward accomplishing that outcome, course strategies included a workshop on intercultural communication and co-development by the student and the adult learning partner of a set of mutually agreed upon questions for a StoryCorps interview. The class took part in StoryCorps' first national Great Thanksgiving Listen, interviewing their adult learner instead of a relative.

Similarly, the program directions map identified the prospects of developing a language teaching curriculum with the possibility of students being able to earn a TESOL certificate. Toward that end, we have piloted one course, Partnering for Citizenship, which introduced basic English language instruction to students whose adult partners were interested in applying for the U.S. citizenship exam but for whom language was an obstacle. Next semester (Spring 2017) we will pilot an Introduction to Teaching English course. In this respect, we have begun meeting with campus stakeholders and exploring the state process for seeking approval for a certificate program.

### **Recapping**

Theory of change is not merely a method; it is an intentional approach to involving diverse stakeholders in shaping together the design of an initiative with perspectives of multiple voices in a way that makes the thinking visible and accessible both to participants and, in the form of the resultant map, to others not involved in the process. In such mapping endeavors, there are fundamentally two roles: that of, (a) eliciting and facilitating the process, and (b) articulating the content of the map. Mapping a theory of change begins with articulating the top and bottom of the map. Just as making a ToC map includes specifying initial conditions, which are then positioned at the bottom of the map, it equally entails articulating a vision—located at the top. In ToC terminology, the vision

is positioned above a *line of accountability* while the program (or course) outcomes are located at the accountability line. To translate, this means the vision informs the work, but while ToC mappers are not realistically committing to bringing about elements of the preferred future beyond their realm of direct and indirect influence, they are dedicating themselves to achieving the stated outcomes (Iversen, 2014, p. 20).

Constructing a theory of change is a process of articulating and testing the reasoning and assumptions that inform choices of strategies and ways of working to achieving the desired outcomes. Theory of change is not a completely static blueprint of the cognitive and contextual infrastructure of a program, and in this case, courses, but more a dynamic heuristic for surfacing (and questioning) a plausible path of action and outgrowth for getting from an initial set of conditions through a journey to a new, preferred state. The application of ToC for course design developed by my colleagues and me is possibly unique, but seems to me to be a natural addition to the use of backwards planning approaches embraced in many fields and well-articulated in education as, for example, by Grant Wiggins and Jay McTighe in *Understanding by Design* (2005). Furthermore, many, including James P. Connell, one of the editors of the seminal series on new approaches to evaluating community change, has been using theory of change in educational policy contexts such as planning urban education reform (Connell & Klem, 2000) and evaluating public investments in public education (Connell & Klem, 2002).

If, as architect William McDonough has famously said, “design is the first signal of human intention,” then the course design, as well as the interface between courses and an adult education program, is primary (McDonough & Braungart, 2012, p. 4). Design does not take place in a vacuum; this is where ToC is a very useful tool for mapping out pertinent consideration and factors; that is, for scoping the terrain, both conceptually and pragmatically, within which the course and education program are planted. With our pathway mapped, we were able to identify points in the course in which *assessment as learning*, rather than *assessment of learning*, can be employed with well-designed assignments to provide a window into the students' development over the course of the semester (e.g. see Raymer and Horrigan, 2015). By looking to the tier above, we can describe the design specifications of an assignment: i.e., what “work” the assignment needed to accomplish in order for students to progress along the pathway toward the ultimate aim of the course.

Theory of Change, then, is one means of cultivating robust hopefulness, of making a grounded plan from the ideal vision which inspires our work and mapping pathways out of our actual contexts to move us toward that future.

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