

Design & Learning Protocol (DLP) ***A Tool for Action Inquiry***

*"If my life depended on solving a problem in the next hour,
I would spend the first 50 minutes framing the question."*

—Albert Einstein

Introduction

The Design and Learning Protocol (DLP) supports the strategic thinking and implementation of change initiatives that are facing the dual challenge of engaging people from different backgrounds and perspectives while continuously adapting to evolving contexts. When groups come together in hopes of achieving a common purpose, they need, above all, to establish a basis for the coordinated action that will allow them to make concrete progress toward their goal. The DLP helps to make this possible by supporting joint analysis and the development of shared understanding of the situation, goals and the steps that need to be taken to achieve results. It is this shared understanding that enables groups to work more effectively toward desired outcomes.

The approach of the DLP follows the action-reflection cycle (illustrated here) that is basic to all action learning. It provides support to help groups work together to articulate the assumptions informing strategic choices, tailor their strategies to specific contexts, and sense and adapt to changes in context as they proceed. The DLP also supports documentation of this critical thinking to enable ongoing reflection and promote the kind of resilient, adaptive implementation of strategy required for effective change initiatives, particularly in complex settings. This guide is designed to make the DLP accessible and usable in a wide variety of situations.



Purpose of this guide for action inquiry

When people from diverse backgrounds and perspectives come together in hopes of achieving a common purpose—such as ending a violent conflict, securing ample supplies of water or food, or developing a more healthy and equitable economic system—they need, above all, to establish a basis for the coordinated action that will allow them to make concrete progress toward their goal. The guide aims to help make this possible by supporting groups in joint analysis and developing shared understanding of their situation, their goals, and the steps they need to take to achieve results. It is this shared understanding that enables individuals and groups to work more effectively toward desired outcomes.

How the guide works

The guide provides a pathway into four main areas of inquiry: context; intention; strategy/implementation; and progress review. In each area, it offers questions to help structure conversation and suggests analytical tools from different fields of practice that can help sharpen and enrich collective thinking. These questions and “thinking tools” help groups identify and work with different perspectives in the process of developing a shared narrative about the conditions under which they are operating, the change they are seeking to bring about, and the guiding assumptions and logic behind their strategies and action plans. It is this shared narrative that makes coordinated action possible. It guides implementation and shapes the interpretation of outcomes, and it provides a firm foundation from which groups can reassess and adapt their strategies in response to changes in contexts.

While using the guide may be most helpful when initiated at the beginning of a change process, the reflection it invites can be useful starting at any step along the way. For example, it supports a mid-course evaluation of how things are working, stepping back to make sense of results so far. In light of those concrete results, reviewing strategy and action plans and revisiting the assumptions that informed them may help sharpen action going forward. Looking back on an initiative after the fact, the guide provides a framework for evaluation. It also supports telling the story of the change initiative in a way that captures actions, outcomes and the thinking that shaped them.



Exploring CONTEXT

The guide asks groups to inquire, “What are we observing?” “How are we making sense of it?” “How might others explain it differently?” People often have different ways of making sense of the contexts in which

they are working together because their differences in perspective cause them to frame the situation differently. Usually, these differences in perspective are less about disagreement over the facts and more about the different assumptions and values people hold about what is important and what needs to happen. Uncovering and learning to work with these differences to develop a shared understanding of the context will contribute to more effective action. The goal is not consensus or agreement, but rather shared understanding of both areas of agreement and disagreements or differences. Questions in the guide help groups explore context issues such as: framing the situation; the background to the current situation; the ecosystem of actors and their roles; trends and issues arising in the context.

Exploring INTENTION

This area of inquiry is not about strategy or what we are going to do, but rather what we are hoping to create, the outcomes and impacts we are hoping to achieve. Again, the goal is to build shared understanding and a common story of what an initiative is ultimately about. The framing of intention can differ dramatically among members of a group all supposedly working toward the same goal. It is shaped by perspective and also by the timeframe one uses. A familiar story to illustrate these differences is about three masons laying bricks on the wall of a large building who were asked individually, "What are you doing here?" One responds, "Laying brick." Another says, "Building a community center." And the third answers, "Helping to promote a sense community in this town." Guide questions in this area focus on exploring the group's vision of the future (what would we like to see?), theories of change (what's needed to achieve our vision?) and intention (what's our specific contribution?).

Exploring STRATEGY and ACTION PLAN

This area of inquiry moves from the What and Why to the How of the change initiative. Here the guide focuses on helping groups decide how to enact their theory of change and clarify the rationale behind key decisions that guide action. Guiding questions in this area concern: purpose (specific purpose for each component of strategy); people who will be engaged; the process; deliverables and expected outcomes; minimum conditions for success; linkages and sustainability (how will this initiative link to others and how will success be sustained).

Exploring our PROGRESS AND LEARNING

This area of inquiry builds on all the previous ones and involves revisiting the shared narrative about context and intention as well as the strategy and action plans in light of concrete experience so far. It asks "what will we pay attention to in order to know if our actions have been appropriate and useful? And "How might our strategy and action plan need to shift along the way?" This step in the action inquiry process is essential for making mid-course corrections that reflect both changes in context and the learning gained through experience on the ground. Questions to be explored in this exercise focus on taking stock of where we are in the implementation of our strategy, what have been the results so far, how has our thinking or actions shifts along the way, what are we learning, and what implications does this have for current and future action?



Exploring CONTEXT

The guide asks groups to inquire, “What are we observing?” “How are we making sense of it?” “How might others explain it differently?” People often have different ways of making sense of the contexts in which they are working together because their differences in perspective cause them to frame the situation differently. Usually, these differences in perspective are less about disagreement over the facts and more about the different assumptions and values people hold about what is important and what needs to happen. Uncovering and learning to work with these differences to develop a shared understanding of the context will contribute to more effective action. The goal is not consensus or agreement, but rather shared understanding of both areas of agreement and disagreements or differences. Questions in the guide help groups explore context issues such as: framing the situation; the background to the current situation; the ecosystem of actors and their roles; trends and issues arising in the context.

Framing the situation: How are we defining the problem or opportunity we want to address?

1. How are we framing the concern we have that is calling for action?
 - What do we see occurring in the context that gives rise to this concern?
 - What are the values and assumptions we hold that cause us to choose to frame things in this way?
2. How might others frame this situation differently?
 - How would they explain what’s happening in the context differently?

- What values and assumptions might they hold that shape their choice of framing?
- 3. What significant differences exist between these different ways of understanding and explaining the context?
- 4. How might these different perspectives each contribute to a broader more comprehensive understanding of context?

Useful Tools to Consider: *Quadrants; Daisy model; Background*

1. What has been done previously to address this situation or some aspect of it?
 - Who was involved, what were the results, and what were the lessons learned?
2. What experiences are you drawing on that shape your understanding of this context and what might be done to shift it?

Useful Tools to Consider: *Timeline;*

Ecosystem of Actors

1. Who are the key players in this situation that have influence in shaping this context? What is their role In this story?
2. Who else or what other initiatives are currently addressing (or wanting to address) this situation or some aspect of it? What is their role In this story?
3. Who are those directly affected by this situation (in this system)? What is their role In this story?
4. Who else might perceive themselves affected either directly or indirectly? What is their role In this story?
5. Who might be unusual suspects that we might be forgetting? What is their role In this story?

Useful Tools to Consider: *Stakeholder Analysis; Relationship analysis; Concept of system boundaries; Values Network Analysis*

Our Role: Who are we in this situation?

1. How are we currently positioned in this system and what do we perceive as our role or roles? Why?
2. How did we come to have this role?
3. How do others perceive us and what role would they ascribe to us? How do we know?
4. What is our assessment of our current capacity to fulfill this role?

Useful Tools to Consider: *Roles; NFA; Quadrants; SWOT*

Trends / Issues / Forces

1. What are the relevant historical, political, cultural, social, economic forces at play that should be taken into account here?
2. What do we anticipate as the more significant barriers or forces that will likely resist change?
3. What are the significant forces that favor change?

4. What important patterns of behavior should be named and addressed because of their influence in the system?
5. What relevant trends that can be identified that should be taken into account in this situation?

Useful Tools to Consider: Force field analysis; Quadrants; Orders of change; Timeline



*We did not put our ideas together. We put our purposes together.
And we agreed, then we decided.*

Popol Vuh (Q'iches' Mayan sacred book)

Intention

This area of inquiry is not about strategy or what we are going to do, but rather what we are hoping to create, the outcomes and impacts we are hoping to achieve. Again, the goal is to build shared understanding and a common story of what an initiative is ultimately about. The framing of intention can differ dramatically among members of a group all supposedly working toward the same goal. It is shaped by perspective and also by the timeframe one uses. A familiar story to illustrate these differences is about three masons laying bricks on the wall of a large building who were asked individually, "What are you doing here?" One responds, "Laying brick." Another says, "Building a community center." And the third answers, "Helping to promote a sense community in this town." Guide questions in this area focus on exploring the group's vision of the future (what would we like to see?), theories of change (what's needed to achieve our vision?) and intention (what's our specific contribution?).

How one thinks about these questions and the answers one gives depends upon the timeframe used. The meaning of a change strategy/initiative depends upon the timeframe in which it is situated.

Vision

1. Assuming complete success, how will things be different and how will these differences show up?
2. Specifically, what will you see differently ...
 - In *Individuals*: knowledge, skills, behaviors, attitudes, values, mindsets
 - In *Relations*: trust, collaboration, communication, power, relationship dynamics
 - In *External Structures and Systems*: Resources, Information, Laws and Policies, Structures, Systems (legal, economic, social, information, communication, decision-making, distribution, enforcement)
 - In *Cultural and Institutional Norms and Patterns*: cultural mindsets and values, patterns of behavior, discourses

Useful Tools to Consider: *Quadrants; Provocative Propositions;*

What is needed to achieve this vision?

1. What are the significant preconditions that need to be achieved in the mid-term (1-3 years) in order to reach this desired vision?
2. What needs to be achieved now (next 6-12 months) in order to build these preconditions?

What is our specific contribution?

1. What do we imagine as our specific contribution in the mid-term (next 1-3 years)?
2. What do we see as our direct contribution now (over the next 6-12 months)?

Useful Tools to Consider: *Pathways to change; "So that..." thinking;*



Strategy / Action Plan

This area of inquiry moves from the What and Why to the How of the change initiative. Here the guide focuses on helping groups decide how to enact their theory of change and clarify the rationale behind key decisions that guide action . Guiding questions in this area concern: purpose (specific purpose for each component of strategy); people who will be engaged; the process; deliverables and expected outcomes; minimum conditions for success; linkages and sustainability (how will this initiative link to others and how will success be sustained).

Purpose – “what we want to accomplish in this stage of our strategy”

3. What is the specific purpose or goal of the event, current stage of our strategy or activity stream?
4. What assumptions do we hold about the environment we are hoping to influence?
 - How clear and well defined is the problem or need we are addressing (fuzzy.....well defined?)
 - How clear and well defined is the solution or what is required to address the problem?
 - How clear and well defined are the stakeholders that need to be engaged?
 - How dynamically complex is this environment and how has that influenced our thinking about what is considered most strategic now?

Useful Tools to Consider: Streams of engagement; D3 graphic; Events & Processes distinction; On Complexity

People

5. Who should we engage in this process and why do we consider them to be strategic?

- What do we want and expect from them? / What do we see as their role or contribution?
 - How do we think this process can benefit them?
 - What expectations will they likely have of us and this process?
6. On inclusion:
- Are there other important voices and perspectives that we are not currently including? Why?
 - How will we go about enlisting those we want to engage?
 - On whom does movement forward in this process depend...without whom moving forward may not make sense?
7. On quality of relationship:
- What are the current relational dynamics between the different individuals and sectors we intend to engage? (Identity, Power, Stereotypes and perceptions, Interests, Patterns of communicating and relating)

Useful Tools to Consider: IAP2 continuum of participation (Clarity of roles); Handbook – enlisting stakeholders (interviews that build interest); Boundary vs Strategic Partners; Relationship framework; Anderson framework

Process - “How we expect to accomplish our purpose?”

This is where we articulate very concretely next steps, actions, roles, responsibilities, and timelines using the following strategy matrix.

8. What needs to happen / What are the simplest next steps we can take to move forward (activities, actions)?
9. What roles and responsibilities need to be agreed?
10. What is our timeline for action?
11. What resources need to be mobilized?

Strategy / Action Matrix

Action	Why (Rationale)	Who (Responsibilities)	When (Timeframe)

Products / Results

1. What are the intended outputs or products (deliverables) for which we should be held accountable?
(*That which depends on us and is within our sphere of direct control...quality of implementation*)
2. What are the likely outcomes we hope to see as a result of this process?
3. What impact do we hope this process might have?

Useful Tools to Consider: *Outcome Mapping Distinctions;*

Minimum Conditions

1. Identify and make explicit certain conditions upon which successful implementation of this plan depends. We often take these for granted, so the idea is to make them explicit.
 - What internal conditions are we assuming are in place?
 - What external conditions are we taking for granted?

Useful Tools to Consider: *Quadrants;*

Linkages & Sustainability

1. How does this initiative connect to the other work or initiatives that are currently addressing (or wanting to address) this situation or some aspect of it?
2. How has this other work informed this initiative?
 - Who else or what other initiatives are currently addressing (or wanting to address) this situation or some aspect of it? What is their role in this story?
3. How will successes achieved by this strategy be sustained over time (beyond specific timeframe of project)?
 - What measures have been incorporated into this strategy that focuses on ensuring sustainability beyond the life of this project?

Useful Tools to Consider: *Quadrants; Anderson framework*



Progress Review

This area of inquiry builds on all the previous ones and involves revisiting the shared narrative about context and intention as well as the strategy and action plans in light of concrete experience so far. It asks “what will we pay attention to in order to know if our actions have been appropriate and useful? And “How might our strategy and action plan need to shift along the way?” This step in the action inquiry process is essential for making mid-course corrections that reflect both changes in context and the learning gained through experience on the ground. Questions to be explored in this exercise focus on taking stock of where we are in the implementation of our strategy, what have been the results so far, how has our thinking or actions shifts along the way, what are we learning, and what implications does this have for current and future action?

Results / Progress Markers

1. Where are we at in the implementation of our strategy?
2. How have we shifted or adjusted our thinking and/or actions along the way? Why?
3. What results have we seen so far?
 - What will we pay attention to in order to know if our actions are appropriate and useful for achieving our purpose?
 - What milestones indicate movement forward?
 - What else has happened that we hadn't expected?

Insights

1. What have we learned from this experience so far?
 - What questions are we now holding?
 - What new insights do we have?
2. What are the implications for current and future action and strategy rationale?

Design & Learning Protocol FAQs

What is the DLP?

DLP stands for Design & Learning Protocol. For groups of people working together to make change, it identifies four areas where a minimal level of shared understanding is necessary for effective action. Within each area, the DLP helps the group identify those key questions that, if explored together, will contribute to greater effectiveness. The DLP also facilitates this inquiry by linking to an array of “thinking tools” that can help to focus and deepen the inquiry.

What the DLP is not!

This is not another tool for sharpening individual analysis but a framework that facilitates joint analysis as the basis for shared understanding.

Where did the DLP come from?

The DLP builds on work by Philip Thomas, published in [Democratic Dialogue – A Handbook for Practitioners](#) (“Process Design Worksheet,” p. 85). The current version, including graphics, emerged in 2009 through our work as co-coordinators of the Generative Change Community (GCC). It first appeared as an iteration of the GCC’s Process Inquiry Protocol (PIP), a framework for action learning and development of comparative cases. It has been shaped by conversations with practitioners in the GCC and a related community, The Change Alliance. We have renamed it the Design and Learning Protocol to convey more clearly its dual purpose and usefulness.

What are the assumptions behind the DLP?

1. Getting the question right is the greatest contribution we can make to solving the problem.
2. In change efforts that require coordinated action, effectiveness depends on the capacity to develop shared understanding across different perspectives.
3. There is value both in thinking through these cross-cutting questions as a group AND in capturing the outputs in ways that make the thinking visible to the group and thus empowers the group to revisit its thinking.
4. People tend to work from a particular perspective (e.g., peace building, development organizational change) that shapes what they pay attention to and inquire into. Though important, these perspectives are partial, and there is value in expanding the range of questions and issues considered in pursuing change.
5. While there are no “recipes” for change that apply to all situations, it is useful to identify a small set of cross-cutting questions that all change strategies should address. At the most basic level, four areas these questions should address are **context** and **purpose** (both areas where people often bring unstated differences in perception and motivation, yet shared understanding is an important foundation for effective action), **strategy** (where effectiveness depends on clarity of thinking) and **learning** (because effectiveness in implementation requires the capacity to monitor and respond to changes on the ground, which in turn requires learning and adaptation of both thinking and action).

Who can benefit from using the DLP?

Groups whose work necessitates interaction among people of different backgrounds and perspectives can use the DLP to support their efforts to achieve a common goal. Networks or groups of practitioners who want to learn from each other can benefit from using a common format for capturing and reporting on their work.

What does the DLP contribute to change processes?

The intangible contribution is the support the DLP provides for 1) expanding the scope of questions and issues that people pay attention to and 2) achieving shared understanding. The tangible contribution is the concrete artifacts it creates that can support monitoring and adaptation.

What does it mean to “use the DLP”?

At a minimum, using the DLP involves drawing on the four areas of inquiry to shape the processes of planning, implementation, monitoring and learning in a change initiative. This means taking sufficient time in the group to address these questions explicitly and to document the shared understanding that results. It may also involve using the thinking tools suggested in the DLP document.

What are the thinking tools?

The thinking tools suggested by the DLP are frameworks and models that help structure ways groups can think about a given question. The DLP document offers suggestions for a selection of thinking tools drawn from different fields of practice that may provide different perspectives on and approaches to the question at hand.

What’s unique about this approach?

The DLP is unique in the way it invites groups to consider questions and use thinking tools that reflect the perspectives and priorities of different fields and disciplines.