Developing a Theory of Change

Background

Our organisation identified a need to communicate more effectively and concisely 'what we do' to a range of stakeholders who included: young people, staff, trustees, commissioners and funders. Our thinking had become tacitly embedded in our day to day practice and we found it very hard to talk about it explicitly. We found we needed to communicate what we did in order to inform sales, ensure quality practice, and to measure outcomes. Impact is becoming all important in an era of performativity and managerialism, this challenge is great for charitable organisations, especially if you are trying to measure something that you cannot express. This context and rationale led us to investigate and then develop a theory of change. This article explains what a theory of change is, and how we tackled its development organisationally.

A theory of what?

A theory of change is a logic model. This is a pictorial map of a programme or intervention that shows your systematic thinking about the people who will come on the programme, what you will do, and how that will lead to outcomes. A logic model can provide the same thing to programmes that involve social and human change, that business plans have provided for simple, linear organisations.

"a theory of change is a description of a social change initiative that shows how early changes relate to more intermediate changes and then to longer-term change"

As this quote shows, theory of change is a logic model that states that in order to achieve outcome C in a social context, you will put steps A and B into place. The concept emerged from 'realistic' evaluation methodologies in the 1980s. It is now common in the UK in 'social return on investment' measures and in the UK Department for Education guidance for youth work .

A theory of change is usually mapped backwards, starting with the impact that you aim to achieve, working back through all the smaller outcomes that are needed to achieve that aim, and linking those to the inputs and activities that are fundamental to achieving them.

The benefits of using a theory of change are that it creates:

- A clear and testable theory about how change will occur
- A visual representation of the change you want to see
- A blueprint for evaluation of the project with measureable indicators of success
- An agreement among stakeholders about what defines success
- A powerful communication tool to capture the complexity of your programme
- A flexible re-design framework

What do I have to do to create a theory of change?

As theory of change maps are created backwards, the flow of information that goes into them is created in a different way to the appearance of the final map, which builds up like children's building blocks.

STEP ONE:

Identify the needs that you are addressing

STEP TWO:

Identify the long term impact that you aim to achieve to address that need

STEP THREE:

Bridge the gap between the needs and the impact you are aiming for with a series of outcomes and outputs. Map as many outcomes as you need to be clear. They should build one upon another, "outcome A, so that outcome B, so that outcome C, so that…. Impact". You may have a single column or chain of outcomes, or several columns and rows of outcomes in a network map depending on how complex your programme is.

STEP FOUR:

Identify the inputs and activities that are needed to achieve those outcomes.

STEP FIVE:

Identify how you will measure the outcomes and outputs by creating indicators and targets for each outcome.

STEP SIX:

Identify any longer term, or distal outcomes that might be achieved once your programme has ended, beyond your programme aims (you may not be able to evidence these, but you will be able to claim that you are contributing to them).

STEP SEVEN:

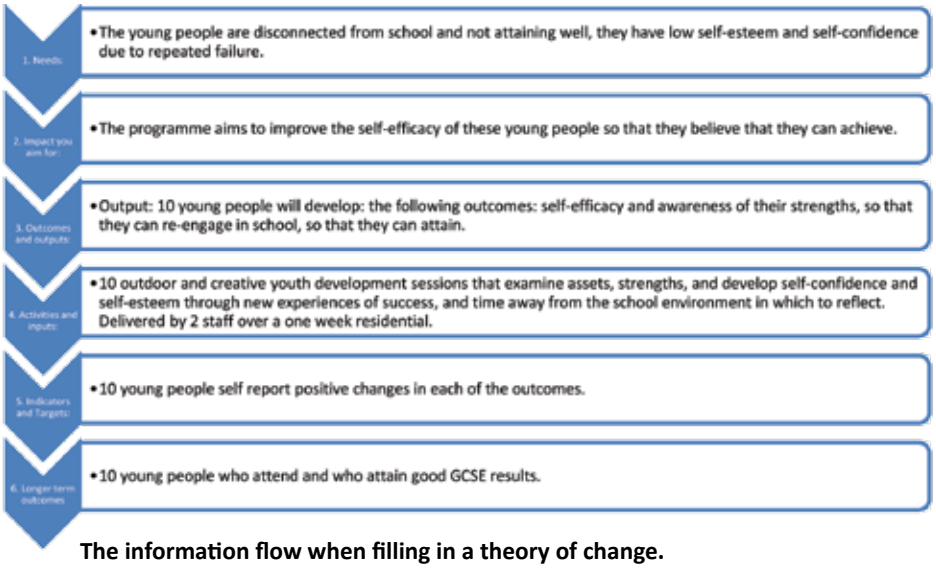
Check the logic and assumptions between each of the building blocks of the theory of change.

by Karen Stuart
& Lucy Maynard

This flow is demonstrated in figure one right.

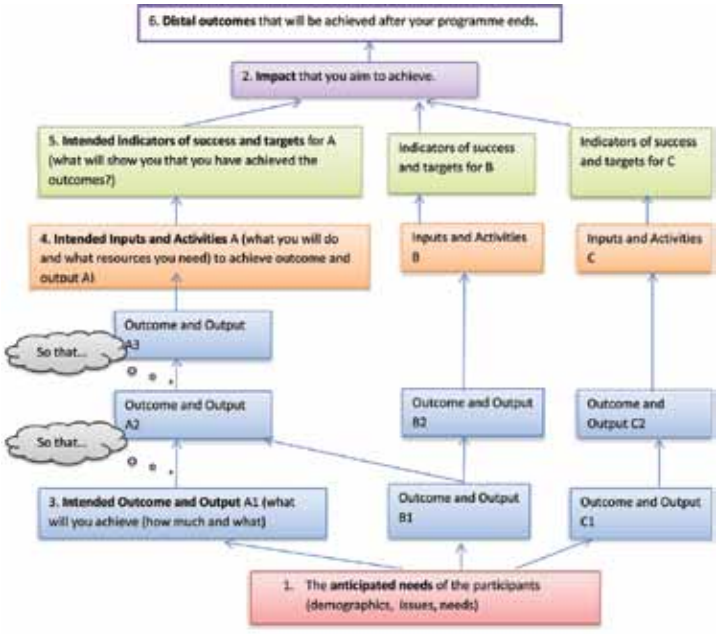
This develops into a theory of change map, exemplified by Figure two below. This is not presented in the same order as above, as the needs flow into outcomes and outputs etc, and it is not as linear as there might be multiple blocks at each level. Don't be constrained by the number of boxes shown below. One activity might contribute to more than one outcome, so be prepared to have multiple boxes and arrows to capture the complexity of what you do – this is a simple example to help you grasp the principles.

Figure one: The information flow when filling in a theory of change.



The information flow when filling in a theory of change.

Figure two: A theory of change map



A theory of change map

Criticisms of the Theory of Change

In response to the growing interest in and demand for Theories of Change, a critique is also emerging. The first criticism is that it is often poorly defined, meaning that it is hard to ascertain its quality. In addition, the term 'theory' is contentious. Other terms like 'change pathway' or 'practice map' may resonate better. A strength of the tool is its ability to capture complexity, but this may also be a weakness, as large elaborate examples can be discouraging for newcomers – and can look like rigid plans. Further, those who have not been involved in articulating a theory of change may feel disconnected, feeding imbalances in understandings within the larger group and partial views. Mandating a theory of change may also turn it from a participatory practice tool into a bureaucratic exercise. When you develop a theory of change it is important to consider these critiques, and to guard against them playing out negatively for your project. Despite such criticisms, we have still found theory of change very beneficial, and believe it to be a useful tool for the outdoor sector.

How did we do it at Brathay?

Brathay wanted an overarching theory of change that described what the Children and Young People's team did overall. Through a participative action research process we developed Brathay's Model of Youth Development (Figure three overleaf). The five areas are not hierarchical, but a holistic and integrated asset based approach to youth development that has a theoretical base and external and internal evidence based. This was a good step towards defining what we do, but this needed mapping into a logic model, it was not enough alone to communicate with our stakeholders.

We **foster secure attachments** with young people. These are relationships that are founded on mutual respect and trust, and that allow us to challenge them in a non-confrontational way.

We **promote self-esteem, self-efficacy and self-confidence**. Providing positive experiences, realising strengths and receiving unconditional positive regard through engagement with challenging activities promotes self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy. Self-esteem is the extent to which young people's image of themselves matches the image of who they think they want to be. We have good self-esteem when there is a good match between the two. Self-efficacy is the belief that young people have in their own capability, having an internal locus of control, where they take responsibility for their own behaviour. This is developed by offering young people real opportunities and responsibilities.

We **support identity formation and development**. Within the safety of a secure professional relationship and valuing environment, young people can start to explore what it is that they want for themselves. They can think about future possibilities and who they want to be.

We **support self-awareness and critical consciousness**. We build dialogue with young people at their own level, developing their understanding of themselves, the world around them and their place within it.

We **develop empowerment and agency**. The use of challenge and dialogue leads to young people realising for themselves that they can be in charge of their own lives. The empowerment model (Maynard, 2011) shows how we can support young people in this process. Empowerment is the process by which people develop a positive sense of their ability to act, develop awareness of themselves and the world, and develop the skills necessary to act in the ways that they want to. As young people become empowered and develop a sense of self-efficacy they become effective agents.

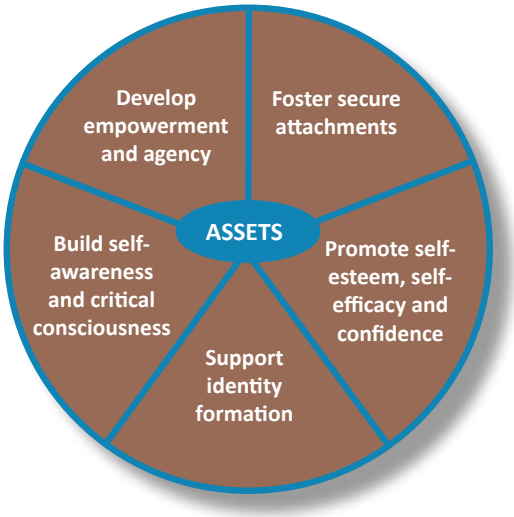


Figure three: Brathay's Model of Youth Development

Our mapping coincided with the development of the Catalyst Outcome Framework for youth work (Figure four). We engaged with Catalyst as a pilot organisation and embedded the outcomes into our work. The outcomes allowed us to describe and analyse our work consistently whilst offering flexibility. The framework also helped us to distinguish and logically map the difference between the proximal outcomes that we could achieve with young people and evidence, and contribute to the distal or long term outcomes that we were commissioned to deliver. Whilst we contributed to these distal outcomes we needed partner's data to evidence them.

This matrix represents the Department for Education's approval and acceptance of the value of personal development outcomes and the allied implication that other more distal or long term outcomes are contingent on achieving these outcomes. We adapted the proximal personal development outcomes in the bottom left box to fit our needs. We had a set of outcomes, and a model, and we turned to internal data to build the rest of the picture. This included an analysis of the previous year's data on young people to better understand their needs, the list of aims that we had been commissioned to deliver over the last year and our evaluation toolkit. We collaborated with many stakeholders to develop the map in Figure five.

Figure five: Brathay's meta-theory of change is on following page....

It goes without saying that this is generic and cannot trace the exact change processes of individual young people, but it does demonstrate what happens generically. For this reason, we also develop a theory of change for each programme delivered that is much more specific, representing exactly what is planned to happen for those young people and that becomes the evaluation framework for those programmes.

What has the impact been?

This meta-theory of change allows us to clearly communicate to stakeholders what we do. It provides us with some parameters to our practice, and helps us to stand firm in our delivery of personal development. This has increased the confidence of the sales and delivery team as they feel increasingly confident about Brathay's work. Moreover, the model of youth development has integrated all the different tools, models and theories that Brathay uses, so we have sound theoretical roots for our practice, and a robust three level practice development programme. As staff become more confident and clearer about what they are doing, the quality of practice improves. Each stage of the theory of change also shows us what we need to focus on measuring including how much we do, what we do and the impact. This data reinforces practice. With a clear theory of change and an evidence base we have been able to increase the success of our applications for funding and have increased commissions. The meta-theory of change also creates a framework for us to annually analyse all our work, and to feed that information back into strategic decision making. Engaging in this logic modelling has therefore been truly transformative for Brathay, and we recommend it to other organisations.

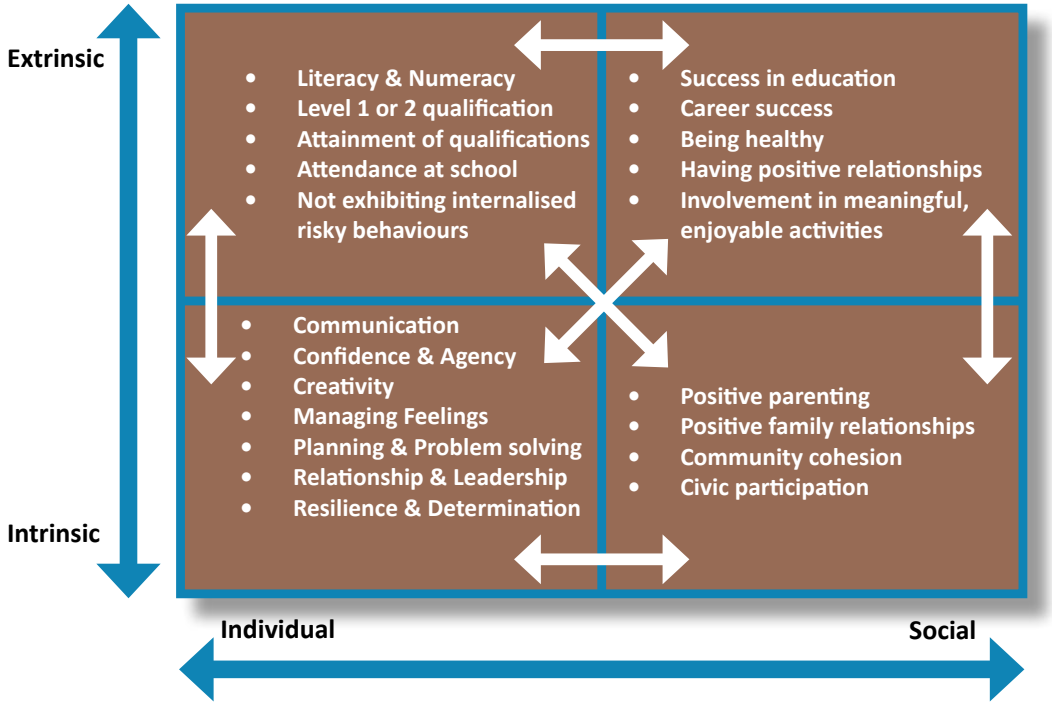
How could the theory of change be useful to you?

Our own experience of using theory of change and the commissions we have fulfilled helping other organisations to help develop their theory of change has led us to conclude that the theory of change process can help you to:

- Think through what you do, turning the tacit into the explicit
- Check out the assumptions in your practice
- Develop a clear system of evaluation and monitoring
- Enhance your communication to stakeholders
- Improve the quality of your practice
- Validate your practice

It's difficult to fit in a theory of change when there are so many different priorities competing for our time, but at Brathay we found that the time invested in a theory of change can really enhance what you do. ■

Figure four: The Catalyst Outcomes Framework (Young Foundation, 2013).



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Young Foundation (2013) The Catalyst Outcomes Framework. London: Young Foundation.

Online source: http://theoryofchange.org/background/benefits.html

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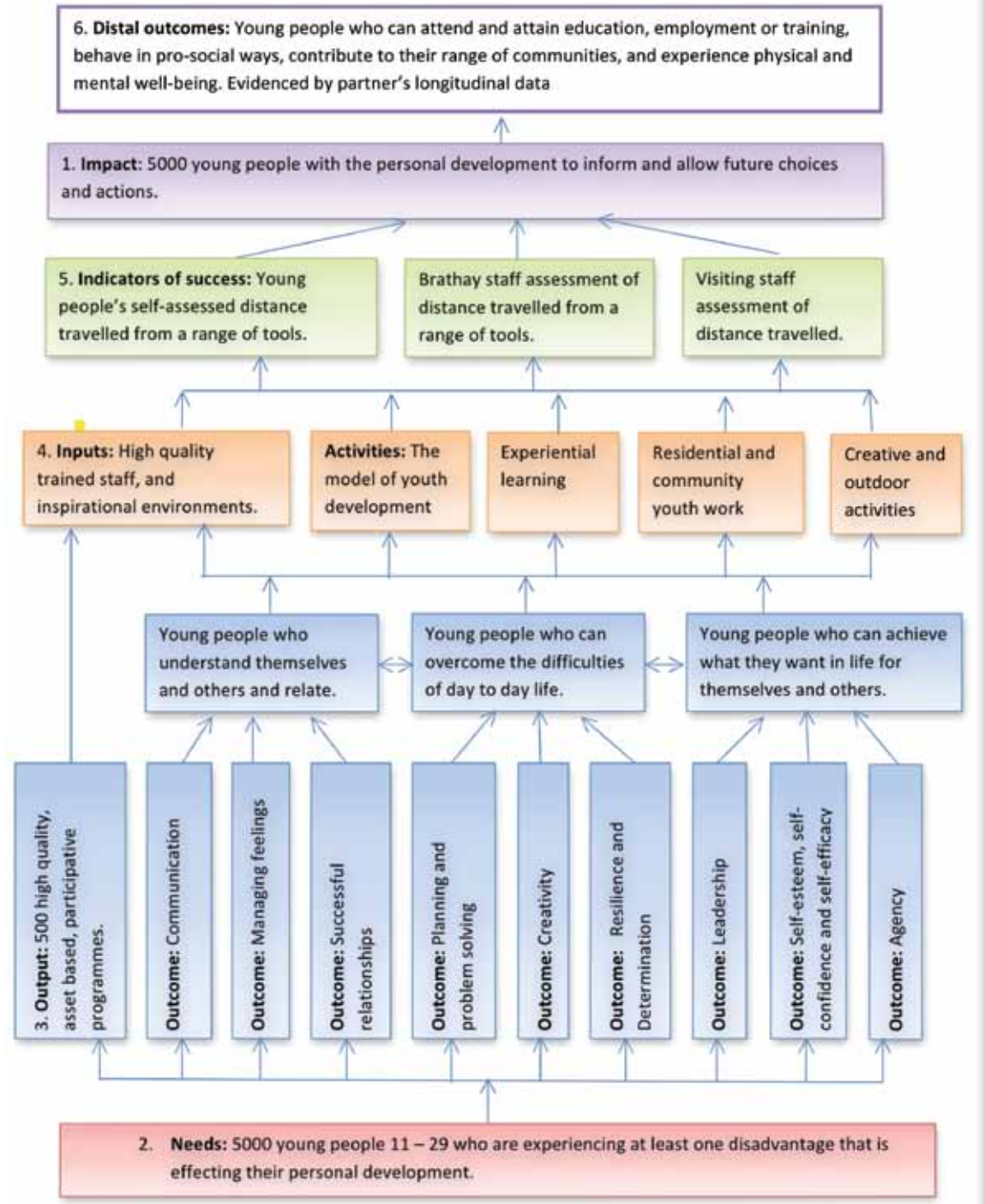
Figure five: Brathay's meta-theory of change



Author Biogs

Kaz Stuart: Kaz is Head of Research and Evaluation at Brathay Trust. She established the Brathay Research Hub in 2010 to literally be a 'hub' of research activity. She really enjoys working in such a vibrant and collaborative space and is passionate about participative action research that helps us to understand people's lived experiences, and that gives voice to those that are most silenced. Kaz specialises in using creative participatory tools for research with people, and support a number of organisations to evidence their impact in a practical participatory way. Her professional background includes primary, secondary and higher education teaching, youth work, social care and outdoor education, all as a practitioner, manager and leader. These experiences inspired her PhD that has identified a model of collaborative agency for people working across the Children's Workforce in the UK. She remains committed to helping people work together for the benefit of children, young people and families.

Lucy Maynard: Lucy is a Research Assistant in the Brathay Research Hub. Her job involves bringing theory and practice together. In particular, supporting people to create deeper understanding of experiences, evidencing these and facilitating subsequent change (i.e. participatory action research). This may be with participants, practitioners or organisations. This is underpinned by her passionate belief in empowerment and critical pedagogy. In 2011 Lucy completed her PhD working with youth groups at Brathay to understand young people's empowerment. The model of empowerment which developed out of this research is now being used to understand how they can work with people in non-formal and experiential learning situations to support their empowerment and agency.

Photographs - from Brathay Hall Turst. Diagrams/illustrations: all from the authors.