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Real World Application of CCT Tools: How Reflection, Dialogue Processes and Action Research were used to promote organizational change and student success in Re-Engagement Work

Kayla D. Faust

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REAL WORLD APPLICATION OF CCT TOOLS:
HOW REFLECTION, DIALOGUE PROCESSES AND ACTION RESEARCH WERE USED
TO PROMOTE ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE AND STUDENT SUCCESS IN RE-
ENGAGEMENT WORK

by

KAYLA FAUST

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SYNTHESIS[*]
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Advisor: Professor Peter Taylor

I started the CCT program while also beginning a new role as a Dropout Recovery Specialist, working in partnership with a local school district. I work with students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out explore alternative options to finish their high school diploma or an equivalent. As the newest member of the center, the transition into a new organization created an internal struggle in finding my place. I was also seeing opportunities to improve current routines and practices as demands from district partners were increasing. Overwhelmed by the challenges before me, I was struggling to determine a place to start. This project explores how tools learned from the CCT program supported my transition into a new environment and supported me in promoting organizational change and collaboration within the center, and inspired my personal growth and reflection as an outcome of this program. Three tools have been integral to this process: regular reflection, dialogue processes and action research. Throughout this synthesis, I demonstrate the process of utilizing and implementing these tools for myself and my team, the progress to date, and the implications for work in the future.

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[*] The Synthesis can take a variety of forms, from a position paper to curriculum or professional development workshop to an original contribution in the creative arts or writing. The expectation is that students use their Synthesis to show how they have integrated knowledge, tools, experience, and support gained in the program so as to prepare themselves to be constructive, reflective agents of change in work, education, social movements, science, creative arts, or other endeavors.

Introduction:

My journey through CCT is one of the most transformative and reflective to date. I start with that because my intentions coming into the program are incomparable to the actual outcomes. I started this program with a focus; after working in non-profit for six years, I had finally decided to officially make the switch from a career in medicine to education. My experience before starting CCT focused on students who attend schools that are labeled under-performing or in "turn-around" status by their school district. These schools have a history of poor academic performance and often have a student population of 80-95% students of color who also qualify for free or reduced lunch. With an overwhelming amount of research focusing on the achievement gaps impact on students of color, and as a woman of color, I feel it's my personal responsibility to give back to children who look like me to show them the impact an education can have on their future. My experiences with City Year and the Boston PIC have given me the opportunity to do just and support students in acquiring the tools to be successful in and out of the classroom and in life.

As an AmeriCorps member and staff member of City Year Boston, I was introduced to education as the newest social justice issue of our time. Every 26 seconds, a student drops out of high school which over time has negative implications on their health, career, and overall livelihood. Many of those students tend to be students of color, with research showing that nearly 50% of the dropouts in this country coming from highly concentrated neighborhoods of lower class communities, often times made up of people of color. The schools in these areas are known as "dropout factories" because of the alarming percentages of dropouts they produce every school year. My work with City Year focused on working in these schools to help decrease dropout rates. We worked with school districts to identify schools to partner with, focusing on those with large populations of students who were potentially at risk for dropping out using three indicators as identified through the research of Bob Balfanz of John Hopkins University; Inconsistent or poor attendance; poor behavior and/or high suspension rates; and course failure specifically in English and Math. These indicators can identify as early as third grade a student who is likely to dropout by the time they reach ninth. My work with City Year was to

support students in making improvements in all three of these areas. Whether it was small reading groups, making behavior goals around self-regulation in class, or making attendance phone calls to students in the morning to make sure they were awake and on their way to school, this work seemed paramount to ensuring the students in these schools could be successful. And it was powerful to be able to see the success of these students who might have otherwise gone unnoticed. I have countless student success stories and have been able to see two graduating classes from freshmen to senior year in my time with City Year, with many of those students currently pursuing post-secondary schooling. It was through my City Year experience that I solidified my desire to not only work in education, but continue to support students in being successful academically and in life. In many cases, a high school diploma is the first key to unlock that door.

 I currently work as part of the Boston Private Industry Council (PIC) as a Dropout Recovery Specialist for the Boston Re-Engagement Center. This position allows me to work with students who have dropped out or are at risk of dropping out explore alternative options to finish their high school diploma. These students are similar to those I've worked with in the past; students of color who have at one point experienced academic failure, been retained a grade level, are part of the juvenile justice system or have experienced interruptions in their academic career. While my previous experience primarily focused on drop-out prevention, this position provides me with the opportunity to engage, encourage, and support students who have dropped out as they make their return back to school or transition into a better fitting program. I see this work being just as valuable as the work I did with City Year. There are often assumptions made regarding the reason a student drops out that are not always true. There are usually a number of external factors that influence why a student has to leave school. As part of our work at the center, we meet with each student and allow them to share that story; each one filled with challenges, but also demonstrating resilience and hope. Our main goals related to this work are clear; connect with disengaged youth, guide them to make a decision about their education, and support them with making a decision on where to finish. While our hope is to place every student into a program and have them successfully complete it, our center also recognizes that

there are challenges that don't make that a reality for all students. As I progressed through semesters in CCT, I saw the opportunity to utilize my key learnings to work toward improving these challenges.

One challenge lies within the role our center and staff play with disengaged youth. The Re-Engagement Center, while part of the local school district is staffed and managed by an outside organization, The Boston PIC. As an outside agency, one of the recurring challenges is defining our role and our work as an intermediary for the school district, its students and their families while also adhering to increasing requests and feedback from our district partners. One of the most recent examples would be feedback we received regarding the readiness of students as they transition into alternative education programs. Most of the feedback was related to trends in students' behavior as they start programs which include an inability to follow through on scheduled meetings or appointments, inability to communicate their ideas effectively during initial meetings or interviews, self-sabotaging out of fear for their future, or needing to develop basic student skills like organization, attendance and completing assignments. As a result of these consistent trends, our district partners have requested that our center work to create a readiness process that prepares students to re-enter school. This request, which our team agrees is valuable work that will better support students, also shifts additional responsibilities onto an already diminished team of three that currently works with and supports all of the high school students and staff within the district. This request like others requires us to evaluate our work stream and expand our roles and responsibilities as non-district personnel.

 This student readiness project also highlighted an issue I was struggling to address as a new member. This project would require our small team to collaborate in a way that I hadn't experienced since starting. During a retreat, closer to the end of last year, the team recognized that collaboration was something we didn't do often and team learning was necessary to increase our collaboration and our effectiveness. Through class readings[1] and dialogue in the

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[1] Senge, P. M. (1994). The Fifth discipline fieldbook: Strategies and tools for building a learning organization. New York: Currency, Doubleday

Creative Thinking, Collaboration and Organizational Change I recognized that team work and collaboration were things we needed to improve. However, up until the staff retreat I was also struggling to figure out how to bring the issues to light. I was seeing the issues while simultaneously learning about teaming and ways to develop it. There was also a degree of learning necessary individually to increase our capacity as a whole. With so many observations learnings, connections and opportunities for improvements, I needed to figure out my approach and plan.

In thinking about the best way to develop an action plan, I recognized that within this project lies an opportunity for me to incorporate tools learned as part of the CCT program. As a result, my goals for this synthesis project are to demonstrate how the tools learned supported me in promoting individual growth and reflection for myself and collaboration and problem-solving amongst my team, while working towards the goals of the readiness project. There are three tools in particular I will focus on; reflection, dialogue processes, and action research. I will share my experience implementing these tools for myself and for my team, the results of using them, and implications for future work. As with many of the projects I take on, there is always the question of *Why me?* or *What makes me the most qualified person to take this on?* For many of the earlier projects at my center, the answers were simple; there is a natural interest in the subject, a proclivity to learning new things, and a confidence in my personal skillset to figure it out or work through a solution. In a new environment, however and specifically thinking about our team's development, what was my place in doing so. As I discovered later through the introduction of the informal leader, I recognized a much more significant answer to those questions later in the program.

Over time, as I continued to develop this project I acknowledged that this synthesis provided opportunities to define and develop the role of an informal leader. A new term learned from the aforementioned class, after struggling to really define myself in a new space I found this

West, M. A., & Work Foundation. (2012). Effective teamwork: Practical lessons from organizational research. Third Edition. Chichester, West Sussex: BPS Blackwell.

term to closely connect to my new professional experience. As the semester progressed, the definition evolved. While this capstone serves as a culmination of my work in this program it also provided the opportunity to challenge, develop, and reflect on myself. What I underestimated going into this program two years ago was the impact and growth that I would recognize in myself as a result. There were events that I focused on professionally, that not until recently I connected to events happening to me personally. For the last few years, having been through a number of significant challenges and life transitions, I realized that being an informal leader wasn't a title exclusive to a work environment, but really spoke to how I had navigated my own struggles. The role of an informal leader, as I describe later, encompasses a number of behaviors and attitudes that I had demonstrated, but simply didn't recognize in myself until closer to the end of my time in the program. This realization amongst others, was one of the most meaningful to me. As a result of working through professional challenges, I gained insight, perspective, and a new direction to address personal ones.

CCT Tools

Over the course of the program, we've been introduced to a number of tools and practices to incorporate in our work or personal lives. For this capstone, I recognized there were a number of tools that I either had experience utilizing or in learning about wanted to incorporate more regularly. There have been three tools or practices in particular that have been integral to my experience in CCT; reflection, dialogue processes and action research. These three tools from classroom experience seemed ideal in working to build and foster collaboration within the center and develop the student readiness project aimed to promote academic success in students.

Reflection:

The first tool that I found myself using and implementing well before starting this program was reflection. I consider myself a thoughtful person. Part of that is because I find myself constantly thinking about things; _"What did I think about a situation?" "Why did she react like that?" "Is there something better?" "What could I do to make this work?"_ It was the regular use of

reflection that specifically intrigued me about this program. While reflection was a tool that I utilized heavily in previous work experiences, this program allowed me the opportunity to further develop the skills and tailor it to my current professional and later personal context. Reflection is a tool that was used pretty regularly with City Year. I often used it in my meetings with peers and corps members or in addressing issues I was having related to service. The PIC by contrast, utilized it less frequently. I was used to incorporating a reflective practice in my approach to working with youth. Considering the number of changes and challenges at the center, I felt that reflection could be a good first step in addressing and working towards solutions.

In researching the meaning and influence of reflective practices within education, there are many interpretations as to what reflection is and looks like. Definitions of the practice include integrating ideas on different aspects of teaching; a teacher's self-assessment or self-awareness defined by a series of steps; thinking in new ways or seeing things from other angles, pointing the way to development; or as the transition between two types of knowledge (Clara, 261). Even within the term, there seems to be a variety of ways to define reflection which can also impact how it is implemented based on how it is understood by the individual (262). For myself, reflection encompasses all of these definitions with a goal to better understand a situation or element while also working towards developing a new or improvements to a product that will have a positive influence on the intended audience. In the simplest form, I see reflection as thinking about three things: what I'm currently doing, questioning what I see myself doing next, and figuring out how to get there.

Reflection in the context of this capstone serves three purposes. For this program, it is to think about what I've learned and how I will be able to incorporate my new learnings to address and change practices as it relates to my work within the Re-Engagement Center. The second which connects to the student readiness project, is to think about the added benefits and challenges in creating and implementing a process while working towards creating a product that will meet the goals of district partners. The third is on my personal and professional development as an

informal leader and how I came to define the role for myself over the semester.   Reflection in many ways has served as the initial step to many of the changes implemented over the last few months.

As a way to integrate the practice more regularly, I decided to start by monitoring within my work space opportunities I found to reflect, making note of what I was reflecting on, how often it occurred and the amount of time it took. A recurring reflective opportunity also evolved naturally in one-on-one discussions with my manager.   Being verbal processors, we often found ourselves engaged in conversations that talked through processes or ideas. I later recognized that these check-ins served as a reflective space and could help me build a better understanding of what was happening, help my manager determine what direction our team should move towards, identify what areas of work either as a team or individuals we should focus on, or think about how we should approach requests or conversations with stakeholders. These one-on-one conversations allowed me to ask questions that prompted us to think or consider things we hadn't previously. I kept a journal and made audio recordings, took notes of thoughts that occurred to me during staff meetings and elaborated more upon them, identified questions or comments made during a meeting and thought of follow-up questions, thoughts or ideas I wanted to share. Over time, I had created a reflective process that included writing and dialogue for myself, and began to see my manager over time develop a similar process for himself and our team.

As months passed, I began to see reflection incorporated in our staff meetings. Specifically, with the new student readiness project, my team and I engaged in conversations about the role this plays in supporting student success but also the challenges we need to consider when developing and implementing this process. We had a number of concerns and questions, many of which we hadn't had the opportunity to explore in-depth with our district partners. It was helpful that my manager and team decided to dedicate a space and time each week for us to engage in such conversations. Having the space and time to dig deep into the concerns we had related to the readiness project proved valuable to our team. We could raise questions like,

"What do we want students to get out of this process?" "What are the benefits from this project for each stakeholder group?" "What implications does this have on our day-to-day operations?" Reflecting on these questions in a way not only helped us all think and see challenges as a team but also brought us a little closer in the process. Hearing that we each expressed similar concerns and even frustrations with the new project, supported the development of our team and ability to collaborate later on.

What initially began as an individual process has evolved into more of a group one. Creating and maintaining the reflective space over the past few months has helped in a number of ways. This was particularly important to me because I felt it could help us work toward addressing our team functionality as it related to our day-to-day functions. While I had had conversations with my manager about it, I wasn't quite sure how to highlight or even address the issues with the rest of the team. Within this newly created reflective space, we shifted the focus from student readiness to our work as it related to each other and improvements we could make. This particular reflection was initiated from an experience where a teammate was out sick for a number of days and we were practically unable to function because we recognized how heavily relied on one person to do a number of tasks. We recognized as a team a need to learn and collaborate more through reflecting on that experience. How we worked through those changes was through utilizing dialogue processes which I will elaborate more on later in this paper. Reflection was really the catalyst to making this change and future ones.

On a personal level, reflection initially focused on how I could support my team to make these changes. The informal leader role was beginning to define itself for me. When I started this position, I struggled to figure out my place; I had a ton of experience working with the school district but didn't want to come off as a know-it-all; I had managed and developed teams before and felt confident in doing so; I felt confident in facilitating meetings, creating and evaluating action plans to help teams work towards organizational goals; I was the only female on my team and most of our student intakes were male students of color. I was overwhelmed by this "identity crisis" and wanting to make things better. My personal reflections often asked,

"Who am I to bring these [challenges/issues] up?" "Am I even capable of doing this?" "How could I help my team work towards meeting our goals?" These were all questions I could easily answer when I was a manager. But I was no longer in a direct leadership position and so I needed to really think about how I could go about doing those things. As I continued working through some of the issues at the center and introducing things from the CCT program to my job, my role as an informal leader started to get clearer.

Dialogue Processes:

Dialogue processes is the second tool I found to be helpful to help work towards improvements from the program. One thing that I noticed within the first few months at the new job was how we communicated. From previous experience, I was used to regular meeting forums and opportunities to engage with my colleagues around a number of things; whether it was new information that was impacting my work or being able to collaborate on a common issue that we were all having. Communication and engaging in thought-provoking dialogue was a regular practice I was accustomed to. Within my center, I recognized that how we communicated often left some teammates without information and the opportunity to have their input or build understanding. As a result, what I noticed was an independent culture that encouraged different interpretations and even implementations of our key responsibilities. Having recognized this, I knew that it would be important to address as a team. Our first opportunity came this past November in discussing and redistributing projects and work as a result of my manager preparing to go on paternity leave. We decided to have a two-day retreat off-site to minimize disruptions, something that commonly happened when we tried to meet. The conversations during the retreat were the first time our small team had ever engaged in any in-depth conversations about our work. It was through those conversations that we acknowledged the value in creating a space to engage in dialogue. Those two days taught us a lot about how we had been operating up until that point, building a better understanding of where we were and what was needed from everyone for the work that was to come.

Dialogue processes is a way to build better understanding and make connections to what is shared by other participants involved in the process. It promotes shared learning and inquiry, while providing a means to create a shared understanding. It can be utilized as a communication enhancing tool, but can also serve as a problem-formulation and problem-solving philosophy and technology (Schein, 1). From previous experience, dialogue processes have always focused on creating a shared understanding of a situation or problem with a goal of being able to use that shared meaning to move forward. From a few issues that I encountered, I was comfortable engaging in a conversation with my manager about them. I can't say that I felt the same level of comfort with the rest of the staff at the center. Through dialogue processes I was able to create a shared understanding of issues related to the center and our work and also collaborate through dialogue on a solution with everyone on the team,, not just my manager. What had been lacking in order to implement was the space, time, and understanding of the value creating such a space for our team had. The November retreat initiated that process. Once my manager returned in January, meetings and conversations continued about our team and our work, which began to demonstrate their value over time.

One of the reasons I've found dialogue processes to be important to incorporate in my center is based on the experience during my center's retreat. Using the example of identifying the buckets of work for our center with a goal of understanding what we each were focusing on, our manager quickly realized through this conversation that my colleague and I had very different interpretations of our role and responsibilities. As a result, we ended up spending much of the first day reviewing our position description and talking through what we actually do and focus on daily. This dialogue, which involved a number of questions and active listening on all our parts, provided an opportunity for my manager to get an understanding of how each of us interpreted and understood our work along with the challenges we were encountering. It was the first time that we had actively worked to create a shared understanding of a specific task and then worked through how to address it. In many ways dialogue increased and strengthened communication amongst us, which before the retreat was something we had not actively worked towards improving. As a result of the 2-day retreat, we decided to create a

regular space for the manager and specialists to engage in more dialogue about the work, similar to what we experienced that first day of the retreat. We went further by discussing our current meeting schedule, identifying what was and was no longer necessary and repurposing meetings to our benefit.

What evolved since that November retreat are regular opportunities for us to engage in dialogue about the work we do. It was clear that communication was something as a center we all needed to work on, and in creating the space for us to meet, over time we began to see a change in our workflow and our team dynamics. We repurposed two meetings and added an additional one; a Monday whole team check which includes our Administrative Assistants; our Thursday meetings which alternated between our Director and Data Analyst attending; and our new Friday meetings with the manager and specialists. Each meeting had its own purpose as identified through dialogues from our retreat. While our team had worked to repurpose the focus of our new meetings, we also worked and discussed with the additional meeting attendees what we wanted to get out of the meetings, what conversations or issues could be addressed, and specific work or tasks that could be completed. Since starting these meetings in January, I've noticed a shift and increase in productivity but also the development of the meeting spaces as a place for inquiry and learning. Our team feels much more comfortable asking questions, identifying concerns and even asking for help or feedback.

Dialogue processes were also helpful in developing the relationship between me and my teammate. I've met with my manager about our work relationship; how minimally we communicated, how I felt I had a lot of projects on my plate in comparison to my teammate, and how we each had a very different skill set and interest in certain parts of the work. My teammate was very much into doing the rote tasks; the student intake meetings, student follow-up, and phone calls. I enjoyed doing those things but was also really interested in the development of our new database, in looking at data trends for student placements, and engaged in school visits as opportunities for me to learn more about the work, the center and the organization. However, what my overzealous initiative created was this imbalance in

projects and responsibilities. It also created an internal frustration on my behalf. One of the first few conversations during our new Friday meetings, led by my manager was around those very topics; the work relationship between the teammate and I, our working styles/preferences, and how we were currently working together. I had never really had the conversation with my teammate individually in part because I wasn't sure how the conversation would be received. But I knew that I needed to voice my concerns and utilized the meeting space to do so.

While my teammate and I engaged in small talk often, we both admitted that we didn't seek out the help or support from each other mostly because it never really crossed either of our minds to do so. I openly shared my observations of what I saw happening and so did my teammate. He acknowledged that at times he is reserved from doing things that force him to create as he didn't see it as a personal strength. He also is not a fan of data and shared that his personality if often one to remain in the background which he acknowledged as something he wants to change. I also shared how I don't think there had ever really been a space for us to talk about our working relationship, what we were working on, or how each of us could help out before we started having these meetings. Creating this specific space for the three of us really began to help us in our work together as a team. Over the last three months we've explored other conversations related to work and even our personal lives which really helped to create an openness between the three of us that hadn't existed before. There are notable improvements in the functionality of our center because of the conversations that we had. What I think has been really important is the process of learning and growing together as a team that creating this regular space has fostered. One noticeable improvement is in the learning and level of comfort of teammates doing additional tasks. Teammates are starting to step up, ask questions, and take more initiative as a result of more regular communication happening. Because more people are aware of what's happening and are more willing to ask for help and share challenges, there are more opportunities for collaboration, learning and team building to happen. While things are not perfect, there are still notable differences in how we function because we engage in dialogue more regularly.

Action Research:

Action Research is a term I was first introduced to in working with the PIC. Work around re-engaging youth to complete high school has heavily involved action research, with much of that work being pioneered in Boston. As the leader of the Re-Engagement Network across the US, the BPS Re-Engagement Center has served as a model for other centers and programs. Our center's manager has been involved in this work since its beginning in 2006. As a former high school dropout, he talks about the evolution of re-engagement work over the past 10 years. He speaks of the many changes and influences in policies he's seen locally and nationally[2] within a network of nearly 21 cities engaged in similar work[3]. Through CCT I was able to build a deeper understanding of action research and how to design and implement my own. After developing my own action research project in a previous semester on ways to improve outreach to disengaged students, I felt comfortable developing the student readiness project through the lens of action research.

Action Research can be defined as a disciplined process of inquiry that is designed by and for those taking the action, with a focus on refining and making improvements to a specific practice or element (Sagor,1). The goal of action research is to ultimately help the researcher become more effective at something they specifically care about. In CCT, we were introduced to a model of action research which involves cycles and epicycles. The cycles and epicycles allow for a project to be identified, developed, implemented and evaluated with the goal of continuing this process from identification through evaluation which promotes more learning and exploration, and helps to work toward the intended goal. In determining the approach our center would take in creating this student readiness process, and based on readings and work completed in *Action Research for Education, Professional and Personal Change*[4] action-research

[2] http://bostonpic.org/assets/research/Research_LMI_YTTF-10-Year-Retrospective.pdf
[3] The National League of Cities: http://www.nlc.org/reengagement
[4] Text from Action Research class: Schmuck, R. (either 1997 or 2006). Practical Action Research for Change. Arlington Heights, IL: Skylight.
Taylor, P. and J. Szteiter (2012) Taking Yourself Seriously: Processes of Research and Engagement Arlington, MA: The Pumping Station

seemed like the best direction to take. Because there is not a template or process that we can emulate, much of what we design for these students will be based on our knowledge working with them, specific feedback received from programs about what student skills are needed to re-enter school, and researching different readiness programs, specifically looking at career readiness trainings, which are the most prevalent to see what plan we can create to support these students. Since this is the first time our center has ever created and implemented such a process, there is a need to reflect and evaluate what we created and redesign and re-implement changes to the workshop or even take a different approach for the following school year based on feedback and evaluations to happen at the end of the year.

An action research cycle begins with identifying what needs to be changed based on an evaluation of a current situation. In our case, it would be how prepared students are when they start an alternative education program or HiSET program. We first had to define what readiness meant within the context of returning to school. We then proposed and planned our actions which is the student readiness workshops which we hope would impact the stick-rate of students in those programs every year. Stick-rate is a term that was first coined by the PIC to help better define their work and its results. To determine a stick rate, our center looks at the number of students (which we define as a cohort) placed by the first two months of the school year into an alternative or high school equivalency program and the percentage of them that continue and complete a full school year. The stick rate has grown over the years and currently sits at 78% for the 2015-2016 school year. The stick rate is what we would use to evaluate the effectiveness of the action, which is the last part within this cycle of action research.
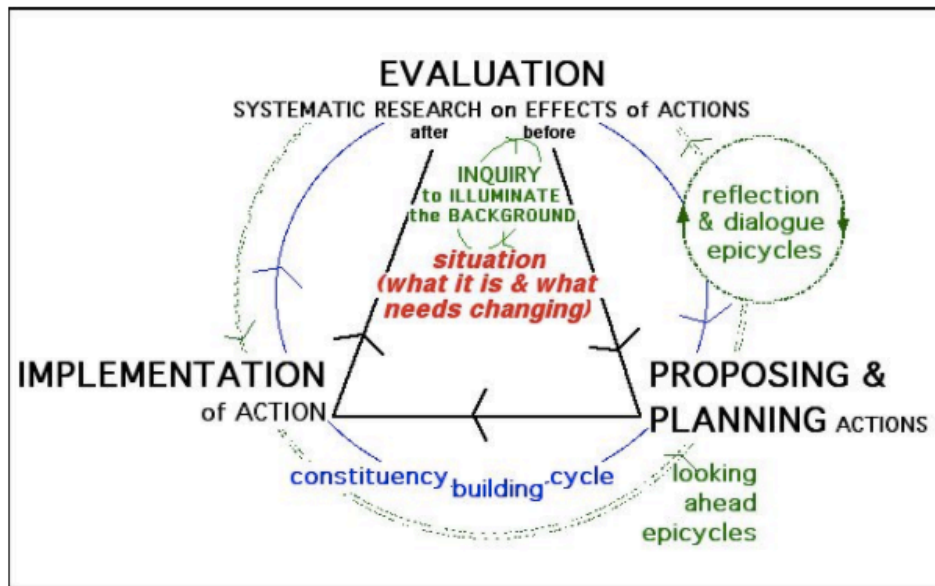
The cycles and epicycles in action research incorporate reflection and dialogue as part of the evaluation, promoting a revision of ideas. There is also a process of constituency building; thinking about who is needed to implement these changes. In our case, the REC's biggest constituency would be the students we work with. We need them to participate and see the value in the workshops to influence a change in the behavior trends previously seen of students

entering alternative education programs. Our initial design came from the initial feedback we received from our district partners and focuses on three key themes: What's the purpose of school and why are you coming back; Navigating relationships with adults and peers; and skills to be a successful student which includes helping them identify their learning preferences and how to advocate for them in the classroom. We will include information on how to prepare for interviews based on work from career readiness workshops. Over the past few months we've worked to design a single day workshop to address these themes and plan to begin implementing it in the coming weeks. What we've designed is based on career readiness workshops that we've researched and some preparedness workshops that a few alternative programs within the Re-Engagement network have started to design for themselves. As we prepare to implement this workshop, one thing we look forward to comparing is the stick rate of students in previous year, none of which would have participated in a readiness workshop, to those who have participated in the readiness workshops this upcoming school year. While we also look to compare trends, we are looking to figure out the best way to collect data from the students and the programs about how effective they think our programming has been to student success. Our team is currently in the process of working through some of those logistical details and the survey development itself.

Cycles and Epicycles of Action Research
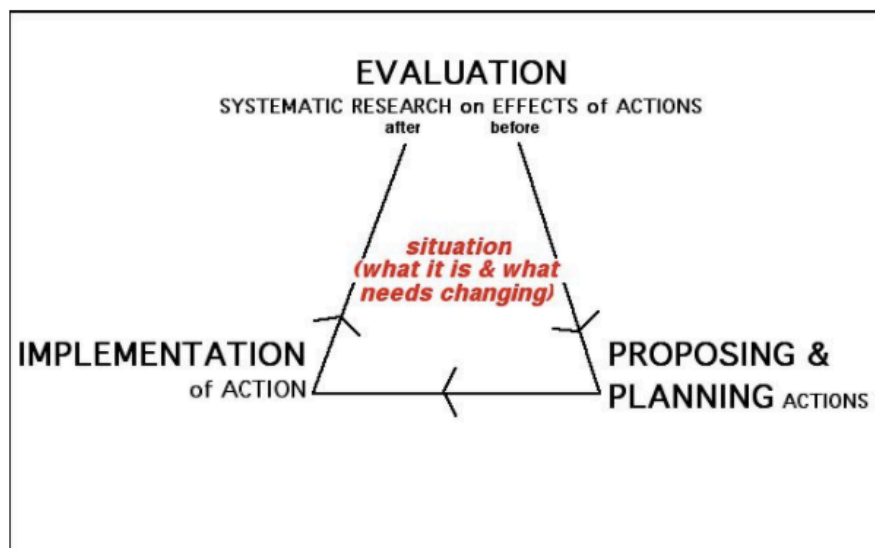
The basic cycle of Action Research

The Cycles and Epicycles of Action Research

Synthesis Learnings and Reflections:

One of the themes that permeates my experience implementing these tools is developing ways for leaders and team members to enhance individual work and to promote collaborative qualities amongst a team. There is ample research that suggests the importance the process of developing or promoting teamwork within an organization. One of the ways to promote team effectiveness is through team learning. As highlighted by Foldy and Buckley in their research of social worker teams, "If a team sticks to its traditional routines, it is impossible for it to learn new ones (27)." As I started this job, one of my biggest obstacles was trying to influence team learning as a way to promote change and figuring out my role within that process. CCT tools seemed like the best win-win for my professional challenges and to focus on for this capstone. There were a number of moving pieces so I needed to figure out what I was going to do and how.

I began working on that theme by focusing on written reflections based on my learnings from the program and connections to work at the REC. Being the newest member of the center actually afforded me a perspective that was different from my teams and therefore allowed me

ask questions that would allow the team to really think and reflect on what was currently happening, engage in dialogue to build a better understanding of our operations and work towards solutions. The November retreat was the first instance of that and has influenced many of the changes we've implemented since. Reflection is another tool that has helped foster team learning as well. "A team's propensity to reflect on its work, by surfacing and discussing embedded routines, by raising errors, and by engaging differences of opinion should also be critical (Foldy & Buckley, 27). The study from Foldy and Bukley also showed that there are 5 variables that are important to enabling team learning: clear direction, clear composition, team leader effectiveness, support of supervisors, and reflective behaviors (42). Part of my ability and comfort in asking questions came from developing my own reflective practice. The program gave me the language and tools to actually discuss and implement the changes I felt were necessary to help us make improvements for our students.

The second and probably more personal theme that came out of this process was the role and definition of informal leader. I realized more recently that the definition of an informal leader goes well beyond my professional work and really speaks to how I've endured through my life experiences. My last three years in Boston have been a struggle. Getting into this program while finishing my last, anomaly (in the worst way) of a year with City Year was at that point a saving grace to propel me forward. I felt defeated in the worst way, especially after having had such a successful year prior. During my last year with City Year, I had by far one of the most challenging teams in our site's history who had a negative reputation with the school staff and administration. We had experiences in the school building that made local news and threatened the safety of students and staff. And the interpersonal issues between corps members and each other, corps members and City Year or school staff weighed significantly on me. My acceptance into this program was really my way out of madness and the opportunity to make sense of the last six years working in education to figure out what I was going to do. I was excited for the change of pace and time to focus on myself. What I didn't see however, was my last year of City Year foreshadowing what would come in the two years that have followed; starting a new job as an administrative assistant; starting this program; moving in with my

partner at the time; my grandfather being diagnosed with stage 4 colon cancer the first month of school and the stress and anxiety not being home with him until he passed caused ; leaving a job, searching for and starting a new job; relationships at home going south; breaking up with my partner and other life happenings in between. I would always joke and say I was going to write a book, because some of the stories and events that occurred, I couldn't make up if I wanted to. So often I found myself asking "Why me?" to the point I considered getting it permanently tattooed. I reflected hard and often, talked to so many people including friends and professionals, and cried A LOT hoping that anything would help me make sense of these things happening concurrently while also being in school. The irony is that not until we presented our synthesis projects a few weeks ago did the purpose and significance of those events become clear.

As we were doing the reflective debrief activity to close out the night of presentations, I had an emotional epiphany about who I was and the role I played not just at the Re-Engagement Center but in life. I was moved to tears as I thought about everything that had happened up until that moment. I recognized my move to this city as one of the most transformative experiences of my 20s, even more so within the last couple of years. So often I focused on the negative experiences I had here, the most recent ones I shared in the previous paragraph. I had come to a point where I let those challenges define me and my self-worth. I knew I was smart, so getting good grades every semester didn't really make me feel much better, but was a nice confidence boost. However, even a killer GPA couldn't get me to feel better. I struggled to feel good about myself and the work I was doing, which is a hard thing to admit even now. Yet even with those struggles, I managed every day to get up, do what I needed to do, push through and get things done. I realized during that activity, after hearing my classmate share her life story of traveling to the US and her experience with education in two different countries and languages, that I had accomplished significantly more than I give myself credit for. I was so caught up in the journey, that I didn't appreciate it for what it was teaching me at the time. So even though this synthesis is supposed to be a reflection of my learnings and implications for future work, in a way it really served as a reflective journey of self.

When I think about an informal leader, they aren't someone who has to lead by being in charge or even needs to be direct. It is through action that they demonstrate their influence. It is through their questions that they build understanding and promote change. They work to include all and know that the work is never really done. We had often talked about the role of a leader when I worked at City Year and talked about how leadership comes in many different forms outside of the traditional authoritarian picture we often envision. More recently in reflecting on my experience in the program, I was reminded of a City Year founding story that I received from my manager at the time. In the organization, there are founding stories which reflect the cultural beliefs of the organization and explore themes such as leadership, compassion, community and service to a cause greater than self. During one of our yearly staff retreats, our supervisors were in charge of giving us each a founding story that they felt best embodied us and our leadership. My manager gave me the founding story, "A Long Walk." "A Long Walk" is a reflective piece written on Nelson Mandela and his imprisonment during apartheid in South Africa. It focuses on the sacrifices he made for his country but really emphasizes the work of a leader is never done and how there is always a deeper commitment to see beyond the immediate success to focus on making success sustainable long term. My manager gave it to me my last year at City Year because my work the 3 years before at my partnering school was just that; uphill battles until we had finally reached a strong partnership. And even with a challenging team and craziness in the school building during my last year with City Year, I managed to finish the year, study for and take the GRE and get into graduate school. While my story didn't exactly correlate, it was a reminder that regardless of what's happening around me, I'm still able to push forward because I know there is a bigger purpose. From my personal reflection as part of this program, I realized that while nothing has gone according to plan in my life, I still kept pushing towards a larger goal, which I originally thought was finishing this program, but really it was about remembering who I was and what I am capable of.

Implications for future work

When I began this program, my intentions were to leave with some sort of direction for what I want to do next. I'm finishing this program without a definite career, but next steps to figure how to determine that moving forward. I am teetering with going into the classroom to teach with hopes of working toward being an education consultant, but really plan to use at least the next year or two to really work and reflect on myself and the projects I started over the last few months. The school year is almost over, and we're beginning to ramp up for summer, which is typically our busiest season. We just launched our new database, we're reworking some of our team meetings and the student readiness workshops are getting ready to start. There are a number of good things in the progress for our center, so I'm excited to see how these projects and improvements continue to evolve in the coming school year. What this program has given me are tools that I could really transfer to any job, and a more deliberate and regular reflective practice which I think will prove beneficial in my personal and professional life going forward.

On a personal level, I've thought about the three tools I discussed in this synthesis and how I could use them beyond the program. One thing I'm really excited for is really just having more time to focus on myself through the use of daily reflection. A process that has seemed to work best for me is writing out my thoughts and then engaging in a conversation about them. To an extent, it models the free-writing exercises we've done often in CCT classes. I've recently purchased a journal and 62-day reflective prose novel from a young author I follow on social media. The journal and novel focus on self-affirmation and self-care, two things I know I need to focus on during this journey back to self. It's been equally as helpful to talk to friends about my thoughts and struggles, and I've been working to build a network of supportive people to keep me moving forward in this process. I also think about the use of dialogue in my life moving forward as way to rebuild past relationships; how building understanding is one of the things that probably could have impacted how certain events played out. Dialogue is another tool that I think moving forward could be best utilized in my personal and professional life.

As I complete this program, I recognize that I've gained a great deal of knowledge, tools and practices that I can use and an understanding of how my learning and growth will continue even after finishing this program. This process in many ways also gave me the opportunity to learn more about myself. In retrospect, I truly underestimated the experience I would get from being in this program. I was driven to the program because of the reflective practices, but I didn't realize that it would propel me to really think about myself as well. I'm eternally grateful for the experience this program has given me and for the work that will continue beyond this synthesis.

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