



Bringing Professional Practice into FOCUS

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# ANSWERS TO BASIC QUESTIONS ABOUT PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY<sup>®</sup>

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### **The PBI® Collection**

*Answers to the Basic Questions of Practice-Based Inquiry®*, serves as a brief introduction and overview to Practice-Based Inquiry and is based on the text of the Catalpa Ltd. website.

*Foundations and Fundamentals of Practice-Based Inquiry®*, is published by Catalpa Ltd. as part of a series that explain both the conceptual and practical dimensions of Practice-Based Inquiry. It presents a comprehensive description of PBI definitions, assumptions and underlying concepts. It considers the place of PBI in the historical tradition of professional practice. Its central focus is how PBI works as a legitimate methodology and technology of inquiry that generates accurate and legitimate findings about the quality of professional practice. Its thorough and authoritative discussion of *Practice-Based Inquiry* provides the details necessary for understanding the value and how to use PBI as a research tool.

### **Handbooks for Catalpa Services**

Catalpa is proud to provide services to help clients claim and use the benefits of *Practice-Based Inquiry*. The following handbooks describe the stipulations and procedures for Catalpa services of protocol accreditation, chair certification and visit report endorsement as well as the outlines for how a Center can be licensed to use PBI®.

*Catalpa Handbook to the Preparation, Review and Accreditation of a Practice-Based Inquiry® Visit Protocol.*

*Catalpa Handbook to Certification as a PBI® Visit Chair.*

*Catalpa Handbook to PBI® Report Endorsement* (in preparation)

*Catalpa Handbook to License a PBI® Center* (in preparation)

### **Guides to Assuring Legitimacy of PBI® Visits**

Catalpa offers a growing series of guides on how to design, conduct and follow-up on a PBI® visit. See [www.Catalpa.org/Resources](http://www.Catalpa.org/Resources)

### **Catalpa's web-site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org))**

Catalpa's web site provides a comprehensive set of resources for those interested in Practice-Based Inquiry. The website provides you with further examples, details, links to documents and other relevant web-sites, as well as references to many other studies and descriptive documents. These include access to visit reports prepared by PBI visit teams, studies and discussions of the benefits of PBI, *Handbooks* and *Guides* about how to ensure the value and rigor of Practice-Based Inquiry and an informative newsletter about the work of people around the world who use Practice-Based Inquiry principles in their work.

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## THE QUESTIONS

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## WHAT IS PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY?

### OVERVIEW

*Practice-Based Inquiry* is a research strategy, a technology and is part of an historical tradition of professional practice.

*Practice-Based Inquiry* is a research strategy for generating accurate findings about the quality of complex action in a complex institution in real time, such as learning and teaching in a school classroom.

*Practice-Based Inquiry* provides the necessary rigor to ensure the validity of the accuracy, and thus the legitimacy, of the findings of a visit team.

The technology of *Practice-Based Inquiry* transforms a professional peer visit into rigorous research about the quality of professional practice.

The principles and procedures of *Practice-Based Inquiry* have evolved over several decades for use in schools and other systems providing professional practitioner services.

*Practice-Based Inquiry* can be used by schools and other organizations that are subject to accreditation or that provide services of professional practice, e.g., counseling services in a clinic, delivery of medical services in a hospital, reporting and editing a story for a newspaper in a news room, and constructing the words and arguments that capture what the citizens of a neighborhood are saying about the issues of the day.

### A RESEARCH STRATEGY

A research strategy for generating findings that are certain about the quality of professional practice presents enormous methodological problems. Yet, its potential value is so great that for more than a hundred years agencies around the world have worked to create such a strategy. Agencies as diverse as school systems, American universities, Her Majesty's Inspectorate in England, and accrediting associations for schools, medicine and other professions in the United States have been part of that effort.

The professional peer visit is one important solution. A team of professionals visits an institution, examines the practice of its peers and writes a report that sums up its judgment about how well practice is delivered at the institution in question. This is consistent with the common-sense dictum, "If you want to know

how something really is going, go see it.” That particularly applies when the “something” is live action.

### **A TECHNOLOGY**

*Practice-Based Inquiry* is an inquiry technology for judging professional practice. It consists of a set of principles, concepts and procedures that transforms the traditional professional peer visit into a research approach that sets new standards for rigor.

This claim confuses people, because *Practice-Based Inquiry* does not fit the expected mold for how to ensure rigor in inquiry. That makes it intriguing, not wrong.

### **AN HISTORICAL TRADITION**

While some historians trace the tradition of professional visits to the Middle Ages (and some to even the beginning of the Christian era), the visit has been used at least extensively in the last 150 years in more modern institutions such as public schools and hospitals. *Practice-Based Inquiry* is based in this historical tradition. Some say that it gives the traditional professional visit the rigor it needs to meet modern standards for legitimacy.

More detail follows in the section, *Where did it come from?*

## **WHY IS *PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY* VALUABLE?**

Major assets of *Practice-Based Inquiry* are:

- ◆ It directly assesses the quality of the performance of complex, particular, actual practice of practicing professionals.
- ◆ It provides the framework for carefully building inquiry protocols and procedures that ensure that the resulting findings are valid and legitimate.
- ◆ It brings professional judgment out of the closet and transforms it into a tool for objective inquiry.
- ◆ It is a rigorous reformulation of century-old procedures for conducting professional peer inquiry by teams.
- ◆ It directly assesses how well a particular practice leads to the desired results.
- ◆ It opens up the “black-box” between inputs and outputs that is so often a major component of variable research designs.
- ◆ It provides a better understanding of the action that will improve professional practice.
- ◆ It provides a new foundation for strengthening critical systems of professional development, leadership, institution improvement and public accountability.

## WHAT ARE ITS RESULTS?

### THE RESULTS THAT MATTER MOST

The most important results of a research methodology are the findings it generates. Are they clear, certain and useful?

The signature result of a *Practice-Based Inquiry* visit is a report that is written in clear, direct, “tell it like it is” language about what actually goes on in the institution. Since *Practice-Based Inquiry* relies on judgments about the value of action, rather than on the measurement of abstract constructs that serve as substitutes for discrete elements of what an institution does, these reports can directly answer questions about the central function of the organization.

For example, *Practice-Based Inquiry* school reports can directly answer these questions: “How well are students in this school learning?” “How well are the teachers in this school teaching?” And “How well is the school, as an organization and community, supporting good learning and teaching?” It can answer questions that are just as direct about the practice that is central to other professional service organizations.

Using certain findings about how well an institution does its central job is key to building a scheme for reasonable and effective accountability. The more direct the measures of performance catch what participants in that institution actually do that matter, the more effective the system of measurement and accountability will be in strengthening the performance of the organization's central function. While *Practice-Based Inquiry* school visits often create anxiety for a school faculty, most faculties are relieved and stimulated by the fact that *Practice-Based Inquiry* visit reports focus on what they care most about, as professionals, and what they have the most personal control over: their own daily practice.

*Practice-Based Inquiry* teams inquire about what is actually going on. The technology of allows teams to write conclusions that consider the complexity of actual life in a school. Intense team discussion ensures that teams write only what they are certain about and that they have considered how useful it will be to the school in question.

Some *Practice-Based Inquiry* reports are copyrighted and can be disseminated only by the school. Other systems allow the reports to become public after the school has had time to digest the team's findings. Over the last nine years the Rhode Island SALT

accountability initiative has supported the writing of more than 290 school reports that are public.

### **HOW SCHOOLS AND VISIT TEAM MEMBERS RESPOND TO A PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY VISIT**

A rigorous survey of how team members' perceive the value of the SALT visit was conducted in May, 2004. At that time 1,468 people had served on SALT visit teams. Of these, 994 were practicing, Rhode Island public school teachers. This is an excerpt from the report's *Summary of Conclusions*:

The response rate to the survey by [people who had served as SALT visit] team members is 43.1%.

Respondents highly rate the experience of participating on a SALT visit team. 92.2% rate the visit experience as either "excellent" or "very good." 94.6% say they would "certainly" recommend the visit to their peers.

Respondents gave the report their team wrote high scores on the SALT visit criteria for report validity. The percentage of respondents who rated each criteria "excellent" or "very good" follow: *Accuracy*—95.4 %, *Fairness*—92.9%, *Usefulness*—92.6%, *Persuasiveness*—87.6%. If they were affiliated with a school that had received a SALT visit report, more respondents rated their school's report lower than their team's report on these same criteria (40% lower, 49% the same and 11% higher).

A large majority of *Teachers* and *Local School Administrators* thinks the SALT visit is an unusually powerful professional development experience. 80.9% of the *Teachers* and 74.0% of the *Local School Administrators* pronounced the SALT visit as the *most powerful professional development experience* they have ever had.

The aspect of the visit that most respondents see as the most valuable is that the visit is a methodology for inquiring about how and how well a school works. Respondents in all groups rated items school improvement activities that did not include inquiry about schools at lower levels.

SALT team members often submit individual feedback regarding their experience on visit teams. These responses closely reflect the survey findings. See the *Side-bar* to the website for an example.

The unusual strength of the perceived positive professional effects of a *Practice-Based Inquiry* visit on team members is also seen in the summary of comments collected from almost every team

member who participated in the Chicago School Alliance 2005 visits. (The full report, *Chicago Schools Alliance, PBI School Visit Team Member Reflections–2005* is available on the Catalpa website.)

While no comprehensive study exists at this time that directly considers the effects of a *Practice-Based Inquiry* visit on the improvement of a school, there is extensive documentation that the visit is an unusually positive intervention that pushes a school to better performance. There is no evidence that it is either a neutral or a negative intervention. Documentation of its positive impact includes:

The *Value of Rhode Island's SALT Visit* study considers the value of the visit report to the host schools. These results are unusually positive.

Between 1997 and 2002, RIDE conducted a dozen different feedback studies on the SALT visit that considered the effects of the visit on Rhode Island schools. The report, *Salt 360 Feedback and Evaluation Study: Phase One: Report to RIDE and SALT Leadership* sums up these studies and makes recommendations to RIDE about the ongoing development of SALT. (This report is available on Catalpa's web site - [www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org).)

These two reports, as well as more recent observations, support the conclusions from the nine years of SALT visits:

Schools, by and large, have found the visit and the report of the visit very helpful. It has provided them with a new perspective of their work and given them a clearer understanding of what they can do to improve. Even those that receive a “bad” report often respond by working to improve their teaching and learning.

Of the 292 public schools that have received SALT reports, less than 15 have questioned the legitimacy of what a team says in its report. SALT provides several ways for a school to raise concern about its report. Schools that raise questions about their reports usually state that they accept the accuracy of the reports, but they question their “tone.” Schools have challenged only two of the more than 5,200 written conclusions as being inaccurate. As you can see if you look at them, the SALT reports are quite precise, and they do not “accentuate the positive.”

One recent reaction of a Rhode Island school principal was:

*"I am amazed that your team... could glean the insight that you did in so short a time to identify and describe our learning emphasis and priorities in such specific terms. You managed to put into words some practices and philosophies that guide us but have never been fully verbalized at our school. This will be especially helpful as [our] staff struggles to define direction and chart a course with new leadership."*

*-- A Rhode Island Principal, 2006*

Finally, this positive impact on school action to improve learning is a strong theme among the schools in the Chicago Alliance. In 2005, two schools were visited. They made their reports the center of their summer planning and spoke often about the value of the report in their planning. In fall, 2006, so many schools wanted visits that the Alliance decided the only fair way to select the ones that would be visited next would be to select them by lottery.

The recent reaction of an Alliance school Dean was:

*"I have heard nothing but positive feedback from the faculty about both the process and product of the PBI visit. Your team's report and Friday night's basketball victory [State District Game] made March 3rd one of the most rewarding days I have ever spent in this building. [John has been there 9 years.] The final report will be such a gift to us and will focus and clarify the work of the academic plan and shape the school for years to come."*

*-- John Horan, Dean of Students, North Lawndale College Prep,  
Chicago, Illinois, 2006*

## **WHAT DOES “PRACTICE-BASED” MEAN?**

Most modern research methods do not directly assess what professional practitioners actually do. What a practicing professional actually does is at the heart of the matter. Assessment information which has not taken actual practice into consideration, has limited value for improving the practice of professional service organizations.

An important deficit of most conventional measurement schemes is the limited perception of the nature of the knowledge that is at the heart of good professional practice.

This problem stems from inability of traditional research to define the knowledge that is at the heart of good practice in any profession. Of course, a professional practitioner does use the formal knowledge of his profession. But, it is his practice-based knowledge that makes the difference—that makes him a good professional or a mediocre one—that defines him as a practitioner rather than as a researcher or knowledge worker.

The good practicing professional learns from her experience about how to do her profession well. This body of experiential knowledge usually connects a practitioner’s formal knowledge to her action. Some would assert that a key quality of a good practicing professional is her skill at learning from what she and others do when they practice their profession.

This body of knowledge is shaped by the actual experience of a practitioner. This is different from understanding the probabilities that can define outcomes. A practitioner builds this knowledge as she makes thousands of specific judgments about what to do to match the particularities of the specific person who is receiving the service and the particular context in which that person is when the service is offered.

Effective practitioners learn how to learn from particular incidents and evidence. They know how to adjust their thinking and their action to match what they have learned. They know that the right judgment about the best action to take with one person is not necessarily the right action to take with another. The right action today is not necessarily the right action tomorrow.

Effective practitioners learn how to learn from particular incidents and evidence. They know how to adjust their thinking and their action to match what they have learned. They know that the right judgment about the best action to take with one person is not

necessarily the right action to take with another. The right action today is not necessarily the right action tomorrow.

Practice-Based Inquiry begins with the nature of practice. It uses a different methodology to understand the complexity and particularity of good professional practice. Here are some examples of practice at work:

#### **EXAMPLE # 1: IN THE DOCTOR'S OFFICE**

A doctor is a practicing professional. You are waiting for your doctor to tell you what she thinks about why you have had pains in your chest for the last two months.

You don't want your doctor to rely only on her formal knowledge about heart disease: mortality rates, probability risks for heart disease, angina, the effectiveness of modern drugs and their side effects. You want her to think about what is specific about you and your heart. You want to be confident that she understands your particular set of symptoms and context. You want her to be good at making careful judgments based on her knowledge and experience as a doctor. You want her to arrive at the best possible solution for you.

That knowledge comes from how well your doctor has paid attention to and learned from her practice as a doctor and how well she has learned about what is wrong with you in the few minutes you are together.

*Practice-Based Inquiry* is built on this understanding of practice.

#### **EXAMPLE # 2: IN THE TEACHERS' ROOM**

You are a teacher. You listen with fascination as your principal announces the latest test score results for your school, realizing that it is as if he were announcing the winning *Powerball* numbers.

You know the results are important; everyone says so. You know new programs are on their way to ensure that you will teach so that the tests scores go up. You know some teachers are always talking about being professional. But they talk in generalities—"If you teach this way or that, the test scores will go up." You have a greater respect for teachers who listen skeptically, who take what they hear seriously only when it will make a difference to what they do in their daily teaching. Who talk about solving real problems they face daily in their classrooms.

You think about all the articles you read in the press about underperforming teachers, who are too highly paid. You wonder why so much of what you are asked to do does not match well with

what a teacher has to do. You think of how you finally found a way this morning to explain fractions to Leslie and how excited she was to finally “get it.” You know you will have to approach Michael differently tomorrow to teach him. You have found no support for how you must think as a teacher in all of the workshops or planning sessions you have been required to attend. You know that much of the formal knowledge you are learning is valuable, but...

You would not mind being held accountable for your teaching, if you were held accountable for what you must do to do your job well.

*Practice-Based Inquiry* provides a disciplined way for teachers to think about their practice so that they can strengthen what they do, based on what they learn from what they do. This is the special learning that comes with being a practitioner.

### **EXAMPLE # 3: IN A PARENT’S EYES**

You like it when people say your school is one of the best in your town, but you don’t like it when the school or your child’s teachers treat your child like he is the same as all the others or they exclude him because he is different.

You want your child’s teachers to know and challenge your child and to care about him as an individual learner, who knows how to do some things and does not know how to do others. You want them to shape their practice so that they teach him in a way that allows him to find and fulfill his potential. You want them to think they are working with a particular challenge when they teach your child.

### **BRINGING PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE INTO FOCUS**

It is fortunate that the particularity of good practice is what most people in a democracy want for their children and that they want their schools to be good at doing that.

It is fortunate that we want all of the institutions that provide professional services to have the knowledge and experience to make good decisions about what to do.

*Practice-Based Inquiry* is a tool for constructing the knowledge and supporting the actions that are at the heart of good practice.

*Practice-Based Inquiry* brings professional practice into focus by building valid conclusions about the quality of actual practice.

## **WHAT ARE THE COMPONENTS OF *PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY*?**

### **FOUNDATION ELEMENTS**

**DYNAMIC EVIDENCE**

**PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT**

**TEAM-DELIBERATED CONSENSUS**

### **NECESSARY CONSTRAINTS TO PROMOTE RIGOR**

**CLEAR DESCRIPTION OF PURPOSE AND CONTEXT OF INQUIRY**

**DEFINED AND CONNECTED INQUIRY QUESTIONS**

**APPROPRIATE CONSTRUCTION OF WHAT CONCLUSIONS ARE**

**CLEAR CRITERIA FOR TESTING CONCLUSIONS AND REPORT**

**INTENTIONAL VISIT SCHEDULE: DESIGN OF EVENTS AND USE OF TIME**

**PURPOSEFUL TEAM COMPOSITION**

**EFFECTIVE PLAN FOR VISIT LOGISTICS**

**SUITABLE EXPECTATIONS FOR TEAM AND TEAM-INSTITUTION DYNAMICS**

### **PROCEDURES TO ASSURE LEGITIMACY**

**PREPARE AN ACCREDITED PROTOCOL.**

**USE A CERTIFIED CHAIR.**

**TRAIN THE TEAM.**

**CERTIFY THAT THE ACTUAL MEMBERSHIP OF THE TEAM MEETS TEAM COMPOSITION GUIDELINES.**

**MONITOR THE CONDUCT OF THE ACTUAL VISIT.**

**ENDORSE VISIT REPORTS.**

**REQUIRE TEAM MEMBERS TO SIGN A CODE OF CONDUCT.**

**CLARIFY THE EDITING, DISTRIBUTION AND OWNERSHIP OF REPORT.**

**PROVIDE HOST INSTITUTIONS WITH A PROCEDURE TO CHALLENGE THE REPORT.**

## FOUNDATION ELEMENTS

The three Foundation Elements are the heart of the conceptual structure and technology of *Practice-Based Inquiry*.

The Catalpa web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)) provides more detail about each.

### DYNAMIC EVIDENCE

Visit evidence is based in the school in real-time. It is a team member's verbal representation of a small segment of the actual life of a school or the structure or context in a school. In team discussions, admissible evidence is limited to what team members actually see and hear or read about the school during the short time they are there.

Collecting accurate evidence is essential to the visit. It provides the grist for the substance of the team's conclusions. It demonstrates the level of the team's understanding of the school. It ensures the reader that the team has the basis to support its conclusions. It prevents the team from engaging in self-indulgent exercises.

Because of the nature of what a visit studies—complex action in a complex institution in real time—the definition of evidence is imprecise, dynamic and complex. The definition of evidence is deliberately not precise and static so as not to distort that complexity for the team member collecting it.

### PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT

Professional judgment is what a practicing practitioner brings to bear when she makes a decision about what action is best for her to take with a student (client). Good judgment includes her formal knowledge and connects her practice to what she has learned from her actual practice.

To make sense of the complex, dynamic patterns of evidence that represent the real life of a school, teams must rely on their individual judgments and their collective, corporate professional judgment.

By making explicit and direct use of professional judgment, the team controls its own understanding of why it is writing a conclusion. This serves as a brake on perceptions that would introduce bias into a discussion and lead the team astray from the evidence at hand.

The maxim of English inspectors, “Know what you see, not see what you know,” goes to the heart of how professional judgment

works in an inquiry. The collection of evidence, the team's deliberations of that evidence and the requirement for deliberated consensus agreement—all refine and check the judgment of the individual team members and the judgment of the team, as a whole.

### **TEAM-DELIBERATED CONSENSUS**

Every person on the team must agree that a conclusion meets the tests of accuracy and importance and that the report meets the tests for a report. When writing conclusions, team members agree to practically every word they chose to use.

Deliberated Team Consensus is the element that ensures the rigor of the inquiry and the legitimacy of a team's findings. In addition, Deliberated Team Consensus strengthens the team's collection of evidence and its use of professional judgment.

This Catalpa guidance document for team chairs provides further detail about how to build Deliberated Team Consensus.

## **NECESSARY CONSTRAINTS TO ENSURE RIGOR**

Necessary Constraints to Ensure Rigor provide the boundaries and structure to the visit so that the three Foundation Elements are the central research elements of the visit and so that the interaction between them maintains the balance necessary for actual and perceived legitimacy of the findings.

### **CLEAR DESCRIPTION OF PURPOSE AND CONTEXT OF INQUIRY**

The purpose of the inquiry includes a description of the work of the practicing professionals, the organizational structure they work within and the knowledge that is expected to be generated by the inquiry.

A clear description of the background of the inquiry explains the history and reasons for conducting the inquiry, the reasons for using *Practice-Based Inquiry*, the action that is expected to result from the findings, whether and how the inquiry and its results are linked to accountability and support systems and the capacity of the managing institution to manage the visit inquiry.

### **DEFINED AND CONNECTED INQUIRY QUESTIONS**

The overall inquiry questions must be limited in number (three is ideal), stated extraordinarily clearly and directly, e.g., How well do the students in this school learn? The connections between the questions and the Focus Areas of the inquiry should be direct and obvious, e.g., student learning. The outline of the final report that the team will write is the final tool for defining the purpose and focus of the inquiry.

The interplay between the Foundation Elements is complex as is the social dynamic of the team. Sharp, simple and clearly connected inquiry questions should give the team boundaries that do not defuse or limit its thinking about what is happening.

### **APPROPRIATE CONSTRUCTION OF WHAT CONCLUSIONS ARE**

*Practice-Based Inquiry* is conclusion driven.

Writing conclusions about a school, a program or an organization is the operational description of what a visit team does. The visit is a “conclusion-driven” process.

Conclusions are a paragraph, usually 3-7 sentences long, on an issue that the team judges, based on its observations of the institution, is an important issue for the institution. Each conclusion must include evidence from the school and show what the team thought about the issue (team judgment).

The following points usually mark the nature of *Practice-Based Inquiry* conclusions.

**The team writes its conclusions in response to the question of “How well do(es)..?”**

Conclusions answer about the performance of practice usually answer the question, “How well ...?” This common stem builds a useful coherence across the set of conclusions for team and reader. Further, it pushes the team to include its judgment in the conclusion, a requirement of *Practice-Based Inquiry* .

**Report conclusions are about the actual life of the organization at the time of the visit.**

Report conclusions do not include prescriptions for improving the practice of the school. They do not speculate on either the history of the school or its future possibilities. They do focus on how the team construes the evidence of practice it actually finds and not on speculations about the past or what might happen.

**CRITERIA FOR TESTING CONCLUSIONS AND REPORT**

The team must know the tests and how to use them. The tests are also well established. The team must agree by consensus that each conclusion meets the tests. They also serve as tools for the team’s writing of both the conclusions and the report. They ensure that the team builds the critical balance between the **Foundation Elements** into its construction of each conclusion and the full report. They insist that the team scrutinize its work. The tests for each conclusion are:

*Is this conclusion accurate?*

*Is it important?*

*Is it set in the present?*

*Does it show the team’s judgment?*

The tests for the report are:

*Is the report useful?*

*Is it fair?*

*Is it persuasive?*

(The Catalpa Ltd. web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)) includes more detail.)

### **INTENTIONAL VISIT SCHEDULE: DESIGN OF EVENTS AND USE OF TIME**

Because the visit is a live event, the team's use of time has a direct bearing on how well it is able to form its conclusions. The design of the visit schedule demands choices that are consistent with *Practice-Based Inquiry* technology. This varies considerably across protocols.

(The Catalpa Ltd. web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)) includes more description.)

### **PURPOSEFUL TEAM COMPOSITION**

The size of a visit team and the composition of its members are important both to the conduct of an actual visit and to how valid many perceive the team's findings to be. Criteria for team composition must be set. This will vary across protocols and depend considerably on the **substantive focus** of a particular visit.

### **EFFECTIVE PLAN FOR VISIT LOGISTICS**

#### **SUITABLE EXPECTATIONS FOR TEAM AND TEAM-INSTITUTION DYNAMICS**

Since the visit is a live, interactive social event, the day-to-day logistics that ensure the welfare of the team, its internal dynamics and the manner in which the visited organization and team interact are important. Logistics that are poorly planned or implemented can have a negative effect on the quality of a team's findings. Of course, logistics will vary across protocols, partly to address the realities of the organization to be visited.

## PROCEDURES TO ENSURE LEGITIMACY

For the visit to meet its potential as a tool of accountability and support, it must be a rigorous, inquiry-based undertaking that produces legitimate results. It is not hard to design and conduct a visit that has no special claim to rigor. *Practice-Based Inquiry* is a different methodology with an inherent rigor that produces legitimate inquiry findings, i.e., a team's findings about what is present in an institution accurately represents what, in fact, is happening in the school or organization.

Legitimacy is a measure of the team's actual and perceived rigor.

The questions about legitimacy are:

“How do you know you are sure about that?”

“Why should I accept what you say as the truth?”

Legitimacy is about the results of a methodology—its findings or conclusions. The best response that a team can make to questions about the legitimacy of its findings is usually, “This is how and why we came to that conclusion.”

The *Practice-Based Inquiry* visit methodology provides a solid framework for the conduct of the visit so that it is possible to answer that question in a persuasive manner. The questions then become, “Was the protocol squarely based on *Practice-Based Inquiry* principles?” and “Did that particular team and school follow the protocol closely enough?”

The level of legitimacy that is required in a particular visit protocol is a design issue. For a protocol to be accredited as a *Practice-Based Inquiry* protocol it must meet a set of minimum standards. Thus, the protocol is explicit about the procedures that will ensure legitimacy to the design, the conduct of the visit and the findings.

In addition, some protocols require a higher level of legitimacy than others. The more political the context, the more public the report, and the higher the stakes for the school or the agency sponsoring the visit, the higher the level of legitimacy that protocol requires. It is possible to extend most of these procedures in order to increase actual and perceived legitimacy. Most of these extensions will increase the cost of each visit. The question about design becomes a cost/benefit decision that depends in large part on the purpose of the protocol.

The Procedures to Ensure Legitimacy are:

**PREPARE AN ACCREDITED PROTOCOL.**

**USE A CERTIFIED CHAIR.**

**TRAIN THE TEAM.**

**CERTIFY THAT THE ACTUAL MEMBERSHIP OF THE TEAM MEETS TEAM COMPOSITION GUIDELINES.**

**MONITOR THE CONDUCT OF THE ACTUAL VISIT.**

**ENDORSE VISIT REPORTS.**

**REQUIRE TEAM MEMBERS TO SIGN THE CODE OF CONDUCT.**

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**PROVIDE HOST INSTITUTIONS WITH A PROCEDURE TO CHALLENGE THE REPORT.**

The minimal standards for a *Practice-Based Inquiry* protocol are:

- 1. The purpose and questions of the inquiry match the strengths and limitations of *Practice-Based Inquiry* well.**
- 2. The sponsoring organization has the necessary capacity to manage a visit effectively to ensure accuracy.**
- 3. The protocol employs the Foundation Elements so that they are the central elements of the inquiry process.**
- 4. The Necessary Constraints provide useful and rigorous boundaries for the inquiry.**
- 5. Procedures for Legitimacy are employed effectively to ensure legitimacy of visit findings at the level specified by the audience of the report.**

The components of *Practice-Based Inquiry* are described in further detail on the Catalpa web site.

## WHERE DID IT COME FROM?

*[The British school inspector] will not fail to be useful to all schools which he may visit, by skillfully planning under the light of a searching examination, conducted in the presence of the school's managers, the actual condition of the school. The results of his experience will be available for their instruction and guidance.*

--From instructions to the first British inspectors from Sir James Kay-Shuttleworth, Britain's first Secretary of Education, 1846.

### HIGHLIGHTS

- ◆ The peer visit is a century-old tradition for assessing professional performance.
- ◆ *Practice-Based Inquiry* is based on five years of focused field research and study about how the visit actually works as a methodology of inquiry.
- ◆ *Practice-Based Inquiry* was tested and shaped by seven-years of ongoing work in implementing the SALT school visit as part of Rhode Island's state-wide strategy for school accountability and support. The SALT visit is based on *Practice-Based Inquiry* and has resulted in 290 reports prepared for Rhode Island public schools.

### HISTORY

American school accreditation and British school inspection made essential contributions to the development of *Practice-Based Inquiry*.

**American School Accreditation.** In 1871, the University of Michigan wanted to determine the quality of the high schools attended by students, who sought admission to the university. That was the beginning of a movement to accredit public schools. Almost all American schools and universities are now accredited. The professional peer visit is the signature method of accreditation not only for education institutions but also for medical and law enforcement institutions.

**British School Inspection.** In 1839, when it provided the first public money for education, the British Parliament decreed that schools should be inspected. The English still use inspection as a national, systemic way to know about what it is happening in its schools.

From 1992 to 1997, Thomas A. Wilson, founder of Catalpa Ltd, conducted careful field studies on how the school visit is conducted within these two traditions.

Based on this research, *Practice-Based Inquiry* transforms the school visit into a modern, rigorous method for knowing and judging schools that maintains many of the benefits of the old traditions. It is formulated so that it can be applied in arenas other than schools.

From 1997 to 2006, as part of its comprehensive accountability plan, the Rhode Island Department of Education has supported 290 teacher dominated teams in carrying out SALT School Visits to Rhode Island public schools. These SALT visits contributed a great deal to the development of the procedures and theory of *Practice-Based Inquiry*.

*Practice-Based Inquiry* is now constructed to provide the conceptual framework for legitimate visit applications beyond the school visit.

## HOW DOES PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY WORK?

*Good judgment comes from experience, and experience - well, that comes from poor judgment.*

- A.A. Milne

(What follows is from the *Preface of the Handbook for Chairs of the SALT Visit, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. Catalpa and the Rhode Island Department of Education, 2006.)

The [*Practice-Based Inquiry*] visit is not a study of how a variable impacts a school, nor is it one step in a planning process that is supposed to make sure the school does the right thing. The visit is an inquiry about how well schools are performing. It is a pursuit of truth.

A visit chair does not say, “Whatever.” A chair does say, “What is your evidence?”

A visit chair does not say, “Are you comfortable with that?” A chair does say, “Are you certain about that?”

A visit chair does not say, “Everyone’s opinion is as good as everyone else’s.” A chair does say, “What do we agree about as a team?”

A visit chair does not say, “What does RIDE or the curriculum guide say it should be?” A chair does say, “What is it, and what do you think about it?”

It is important that you, as SALT chair, have the know-how to conduct a good SALT visit. It is important that you are savvy about how schools and the SALT visit work.

The SALT school visit is a real, human event. A group of visitors, mostly teachers and administrators from districts other than the school, visit a school for five days while it is in session. The team members have never worked together before as a group. They often are complete strangers to one another. In the beginning they are bound together by their common experience as teachers or by their deep interest in schools.

The school is a complex place of continuous and frequently unpredictable interactions devoted to the complex tasks of teaching and learning. Team members often find themselves in spaces that the school considers private. It is quite extraordinary that in five days a peer team can report in 20 pages its conclusions about how well it thinks a school is performing and that it can

make these conclusions public. It is even more extraordinary that these conclusions are exceptionally accurate, fair, constructive and well written.

It is your challenge as SALT visit chair to lead the team so that it does this extraordinary work and does it well. Clarity and good humor make that possible. Teaching a team how the visit works as a methodology for knowing a school is the most important contribution you can make to the quality of its report. As the guardian of the methodology, the chair makes certain that the team's findings are accurate, legitimate and clear. The chair facilitates each team to use the methodology effectively to learn about a specific school.

More specifically, the chair is challenged to lead the team in making thousands of decisions based upon what the team members experience, see, discuss, agree upon and write. The chair continuously applies the abstract principles of the visit methodology for knowing a school to the real life of a particular team in a particular school. The chair effectively insists that the team proceed with thoughtful rigor. The chair's skill and knowledge about how to locate specific evidence in the school will make a tremendous difference in the team's work. The chair's goal is to help each team member, and the team as a whole, become adroit at using the ideas and procedures of the visit methodology as tools for understanding the school. This is what ensures that the visit will be an inquiry, not merely a routine process that requires the team to complete a number of set steps.

## WHAT ARE THE USES OF *PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY*?

Because it focuses on how well practice is actually going, *Practice-Based Inquiry* provides new and exciting possibilities for:

### Individual school visits

A school visit team constructs conclusions about how well an individual school is performing. The team seeks to identify the particular dynamic of the school under study so that its recommendations for how that school can improve its learning and teaching have a high potential for being effective and useful for the school.

For examples go to the Catalpa web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)). Go to *Individual Schools: The Chicago Alliance* in the *Project Sites* section.

### School self-study and planning

The components of *Practice-Based Inquiry* provide the basis for a new approach to the way the faculty and staff in a school can work together to improve their daily practice. This transforms conventional school self-study paradigms from a “planning motif” to “an inquiry and improving action” motif. This change in approach and in the nature of the information generated greatly decreases the gap from self-study to action that matters—to what practitioners do in their daily practice.

### Accountability systems

Accreditation plays a major role in the accountability of a number of American professional practice organizations including education, medical and law enforcement institutions. The peer visit is the signature event of most of the processes that Americans use to accredit institutions of professional practice.

The technology of *Practice-Based Inquiry* provides an answer for accrediting agencies to use to respond effectively to the growing challenge that accreditation procedures are no longer adequate or sufficiently rigorous to ensure public accountability.

The story of the relationship between *Practice-Based Inquiry* and the Commission on Public Secondary Schools of the New England Association of Schools and Colleges (NEASC) is an example of one accrediting association rising to this challenge.

For more detail go to the Catalpa web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)). Go to *Accreditation: NEASC* in the *Project Sites* section.

*School Accountability for Learning and Teaching (SALT)*, an initiative of the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE), shows that a *Practice-Based Inquiry* based visit does provide important new possibilities for effective support and accountability.

For more on Catalpa's work with SALT, go to the Catalpa web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)). Go to *State Accountability: Rhode Island—SALT* in the *Project Sites* section.

### **Institution accreditation**

The historic use of the peer visit in America has been to accredit an institution that provides professional practice that meets professional standards of service (school, hospital, police department).

To see an application of how *Practice-Based Inquiry* can make accreditation rigorous, go to the Catalpa web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)). Go to *Accreditation: NEASC* in the *Project Sites* section.

### **Program evaluation**

Conventional approaches to measurement usually leave program evaluators without a good way to assess the quality of actual practice. Foundations and other funders often face this inadequacy when trying to determine the value of their grant making policies.

In 2005, Catalpa Ltd worked with the Chicago Public Education Fund and the Spencer Foundation to assess the program impact of a major teacher training program on the quality of learning and teaching in Chicago public schools serving poor neighborhoods.

To see an application of how *Practice-Based Inquiry* can be used for program evaluation, go to the Catalpa web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)). Go to *Program and Policy Evaluation: Chicago Public Schools* in the *Project Sites* section for more detail.

Other examples of endeavors that would benefit from using *Practice-Based Inquiry* include:

- ◆ Providing the skeleton of a process to test the accuracy of evidence in government regulation hearings in place of relying on inaccurate proxies, such as the word of certified experts (e.g. zoning boards)
- ◆ Strengthening how accreditation visits are carried out in medicine or law enforcement
- ◆ Providing new tools to ascertain public opinion on issues that effect election outcomes

- ◆ Informing how to build better policy and organizational structures to support tricky areas of public and private professional practice such as journalists reporting and editors editing the news
- ◆ Providing a new basis for teaching students how to use their judgment to build viable conclusions from the plethora of evidence and information that characterizes the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

## WHAT CAN *PRACTICE-BASED INQUIRY* DO FOR YOU?

*Although I am involved with many teams and lots of professional development, sometimes I feel fragmented. I want to find away to make it fit together and function more like a puzzle rather than like a box full of items. This I want not only for myself, but for my school. ...*

*I very much enjoyed being a part of this process of helping schools to promote student learning. ... So often we remain myopic in our own scope of the “world” we inhabit; what a wonderful way to reflect upon ourselves and our own school, to broaden our thinking; to reshape and challenge our practices and to celebrate our profession. I am very proud that we have this never ending pathway to excellence called the SALT visit!*

*--Rhode Island public school teacher, 2006*

The technology and principles of *Practice-Based Inquiry* have the extraordinary potential for individual teachers who wish to learn how to improve their teaching by learning from what they do on a daily basis. While this includes some “reflection on practice,” *Practice-Based Inquiry* is centered more on “thinking and doing in practice.”

A June, 2005, Catalpa survey of the 994 Rhode Island Teachers who served on SALT visit teams showed that 80.9% rated the visit as the “most powerful development experience they had ever experienced.” The survey sought to ascertain what made the SALT visit so powerful. 86 to 92% of the teachers indicated that they agreed with the value of these attributes:

Gave me new appreciation of the importance of teachers talking together about teaching

Gave me new ways to think about my teaching.

Gave me new ways to look at student learning in my classroom.

Gave me a new understanding of the importance of the language we use when we talk about what we do.

For more detail about how *Practice-Based Inquiry* can benefit teachers, explore the Catalpa web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)).

### School administrators

*Practice-Based Inquiry* provides a number of important benefits for school administrators. The results of a *Practice-Based Inquiry* visit report on how well a school is performing give a school administrator a unified and coherent picture of what issues her school must address to improve its performance of its central function.

In addition, local school administrators, who serve on visit teams, learn an approach to school inquiry that they can carry over to their daily work.

### Program funders

Foundation and government grant-making staff will find a new methodology in *Practice-Based Inquiry* for evaluating the effectiveness and value of programs they have funded.

The application of *Practice-Based Inquiry* to program evaluation was begun in 2005 by two projects whose purpose was to improve teaching and learning in Chicago public schools. These pilot evaluations were supported by two foundations that were interested in developing better ways to evaluate programs they had funded.

### Parents

*Practice-Based Inquiry* visit protocols can easily include parents on visit teams. One of the first applications of *Practice-Based Inquiry* principles was for a community-based organization in Chicago. Catalpa designed a visit protocol for parents and community leaders.

In the Survey of SALT team members, parents who have served on many SALT visit teams, rate the visit very highly as a way for parents to relate to a school.

Parents agreements with the following items ranged from 84-95%:

Gave me new ways to think about how my child's school works.

Gave me new ideas about ways to find out how well my child's school is working.

Gave me new ideas about what changes I would like to see in my child's school.

For more detail read the report of the *Survey*, available on the Catalpa Ltd. web site ([www.Catalpa.org](http://www.Catalpa.org)).

**Organizations not in education**

*Practice-Based Inquiry* has developed in the world of public schools. But, the vacuum it seeks to fill exists in other areas of professional service. American medical and law enforcement agencies rely on accreditation that utilizes professional peer teams to make basic judgments about program performance. The explicit focus of *Practice-Based Inquiry* on practice-in-action makes applications to other areas possible.