Bringing Professional Practice into FOCUS

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HOW TO CONSTRUCT LEGITIMATE PBI® CONCLUSIONS

A PBI® Guide

Catalpa Ltd.

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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. It is based on the text of the Catalpa Ltd. website.

Fundamentals and Foundations 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 Ensuring the 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

Catalpa's web-site (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 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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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The sections of this *Guide* discuss several topics that help define Practice-Based Inquiry® visit conclusions to guide visit chairs in leading their teams to construct accurate and strong conclusions.

These sections are built from documents that first appeared in the SALT Chair Handbook, 1st Edition (1999). They have been revised and brought up-to-date based on current knowledge of how the visit works as an inquiry.

The SALT visit chairs, SALT staff, and the more than 1,600 SALT team members were among the important sources of revisions. Others include editors, critics and team participants in Chicago and England.

Principles of conduct that are present in this *Guide* may or may not be required as part of a Practice-Based Inquiry® protocol. Please consult the *Guide to protocol development* for current stipulations.

Thomas A. Wilson
Principal Partner

October 21, 2006

WHAT ARE CONCLUSIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMENDATIONS

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions are the team's findings about the central question for each of the set focus areas of the inquiry.

Each conclusion is one paragraph, usually three-to-seven sentences in length. The language of each conclusion imbeds evidence and judgment. A team should avoid using lists and "writing that is neutral."

Conclusions are direct, concise, and clear. Clear, complex sentences usually better express the relationship between evidence and judgment. The language in the report must reveal the team's professional judgment. It cannot be simple description.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND COMMENDATIONS

The team constructs its recommendations and commendations for each focus area after it has formed its conclusions for that area. The team limits its recommendations and commendations to issues that the conclusions raise.

While the team's recommendations and commendations are based upon the conclusions in a focus area, this is not a simple one-to-one relationship. Some conclusions will result in no commendations or recommendations. Others may result in a commendation, but no recommendation. Recommendations may relate to more than one conclusion, and there may be more than one recommendation for a conclusion.

COMMENDATIONS

In each focus area the team may commend the school for specific parts of its practice, which it believes are exceptionally successful. It awards commendations for actions the school is taking or for its unusual accomplishments. It does not commend a school for something that is not yet apparent in the actual life of the school. The school must be in the process of implementing what the team commends; it cannot be only an idea or a plan. However, the team can commend a school for good planning, providing the planning has already taken place.

Teams must be certain they believe that the school has earned the commendation. Teams may (and do) make no commendations in a focus area. A team will not normally award more than three commendations in each focus area.

A commendation is usually expressed by a noun phrase. (It may be a simple sentence.) It should start with a capital letter, and it should not end with a period. Examples follow:

> The professional dedication of the faculty and staff
>
> The productive connection between professional development and classroom practice
>
> The caring community
>
> The high level of student understanding of the rubric in writing
>
> The school band

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on what the team has learned about the school, its recommendations are statements of advice about what the school should do. The team carefully words each recommendation to contain enough detail so the school will know what the team thinks it should do, but not so much detail that the recommendation is prescriptive. The recommendation emphasizes the action the school should take, without outlining the exact steps.

Recommendations, like conclusions, should be shaped for a particular school. Because of its knowledge about a school, the team has an unusual opportunity to tailor its recommendations to make sense for that specific school. A team is responsible for using its knowledge well to tailor expected and **unexpected** solutions for problems a particular school faces.

A team should write between three and five recommendations for each focus area.

Written in one-to-three sentences, a recommendation begins with a verb that implies action, rather than only a “study” or a “plan.”

Since recommendations make an important contribution to how useful the report is to a school, the team should test their usefulness. The report should show that the team assumes responsibility for what it recommends. A team should refrain from making recommendations that require unreasonable and unlikely additional resources or that are expressed as generalities, e.g., “provide more professional development,” “spend more money.”

Recommendations to the school should be only about issues over which the school has a fair measure of control. If the team decides it is important to make a recommendation about an issue over which the school has little control, it may address that recommendation to the agency or group that does have reasonable control on that issue. It separates these recommendations from the recommendations for the school by placing them under a heading that indicates who they are for, that is, who has control.

THE TESTS OF CONCLUSIONS

The team must reach consensus agreement that every final conclusion made public in the report has passed four tests. Any team member should raise any questions she/he has about how well these tests apply to the conclusion. Questions often lead the team to rework the conclusion. In the end the whole team must agree that the conclusion passes all four tests.

1. IS THE CONCLUSION IMPORTANT?

The team agrees that the conclusion is about one of the top issues the school must face to improve student learning.

2. IS THE CONCLUSION SET IN THE PRESENT?

The team agrees that the conclusion is set in the present—i.e. that it fits the school at the time of the visit. Conclusions are not about what the team thinks the school should be doing or what future action the team thinks the school should take.

The team does consider future action in its recommendations.

3. IS THE CONCLUSION ACCURATE?

The team agrees that the conclusion is accurate and that there is evidence from at least two sources to support it.

4. DOES THE CONCLUSION SHOW THE JUDGMENT OF THE TEAM?

The team agrees it has worded the conclusion carefully to reveal what the entire team thinks about how well the school is doing on the topic of the conclusion.

THE TESTS OF THE REPORT

The report as a whole must pass three tests.

1. IS THE REPORT FAIR?

The team agrees that the report as a whole is fair to the school, to each of its constituencies and to each of its demographic groups. Teachers, administrators, staff, students and parents are the principle constituencies. Special education, race and ethnic group membership, gender and social economic class are the principle groups.

Through the agreement among its members, the team ensures that the report has:

Identified and discussed equity gaps present in the testing data.

Discussed every issue related to fair student access and access to learning opportunities that individual team members have raised.

Not recommended any action that will increase inequity in the school or that will cause educational or other harm to any group of students.

2. IS THE REPORT USEFUL?

The team agrees by deliberate consensus that each recommendation, and the report as a whole, is useful to the school.

The report passes this test, if the team agrees after reviewing the recommendations that the action implied therein will be constructive for this school at this time.

3. WILL IT PERSUADE THE SCHOOL TO TAKE PRODUCTIVE ACTION?

The team agrees that the report is as persuasive as it can be, within the limits of the visit, including the time constraint.

The team should consider these questions:

Does the report catch the unique aspects of the school?

Is the report written in direct language and reasonably free of jargon?

Do the main themes of the report build throughout the report?

Is the report written in a consistent language and style?

HOW TO LEAD THE TEAM IN WRITING CONCLUSIONS

Building conclusions requires effort. Team members often disagree about accurate wording, particularly during their early discussions. This pushes them to reconsider the evidence they have gathered and/or to collect additional evidence. The team works to make each conclusion as accurate as possible. The accuracy of conclusions is determined by the team's deliberate consensus.

In the beginning you must teach the team how to tie the distilled evidence the team has collected into a substantive statement about a topic the team judges to be important. The team's judgment, which is explicitly included in a conclusion, is the glue that holds the conclusion together.

One important point is to be sure that team members increase their understanding of the relationship between the evidence they have found in the school and their judgment. This relationship is dynamic and interactive, with evidence and judgment shaping each other. Building conclusions is an exercise in that interaction. A team begins writing conclusions as early as possible because that exercise helps it in its ongoing observation of the school. So, in a very real sense building conclusions will shape the evidence the team collects later.

Preparing each conclusion, then, is an exercise in the central inquiry task of the visit, which is to bring professional judgment to bear on the particulars of the practice of a school.

Conclusions are direct, concise and clear. Clear, complex sentences usually better express the relationship between evidence and judgment. The chair works to keep a conclusion as short as possible. The language in the report must reveal the team's professional judgment. It cannot be simple description.

Each team builds between three and seven conclusions for each of the protocol's focus areas. The test of importance to the school is how team selects what issues to include. Descriptions of focus areas include guidance about what issues the team might consider most important to tell the school. If the team agrees that there are more important conclusions to include in the report, they override the expected conclusions.

Each conclusion is part of the team's answer to the central question of the visit inquiry: How well does this team think this school is doing?

Consider the tests of a conclusion as tools that will help the team build conclusions. Introduce these tests to the team early and actively use them, even as the team is writing its first working conclusion. Your goal is for team members to introduce the tests into its discussion about the conclusion.

HOW TO LEAD THE TEAM IN TESTING CONCLUSIONS AND THE REPORT

TESTING CONCLUSIONS

When you introduce conclusion writing, make it clear that the team is responsible for testing both the conclusions and the report. Review the tests with the team so that they become part of the team's tools for building good conclusions.

During the visit, consider how well the team understands these tests and what they involve. Remember, the point is that the team ends up "certain" that the conclusion is right in terms of each test. A critical turning point comes when team members begin to use the tests to make points or question issues during their discussions. If a team is not picking up on the tests, you should emphasize them more directly during team discussions. For example: "Do you think the way we are writing about this issue meets the test for accuracy?"

On the final day of the visit, after revising and editing the report, you should deliberately check to see that team members agree that both the conclusions and the report meet the required tests. In most situations it is best to ask the question of each conclusion. "Are we certain about this conclusion? Does it meet the tests?"

If you think there is any uncertainty, ask each team member if she is certain that the conclusion meets the tests.

TESTING THE REPORT

The tests for the report are directly applied when you have a full draft of the report on the final day of the visit. You should introduce the tests at the time of the final editing, reminding the team that it will have to make a final judgment that the report meets the tests.

After all the work is done and when you think the team is ready, you should conduct the final check. It is very important that you directly ask the team, "Are you certain, as a member of this team, that this report meets the tests for a report?" You should be certain that each team members provides you with a solid answer.

This is not simply a formality. Often when teams come to this final judgment, they will see ways to strengthen the report in terms of one or more of the tests. The summary sections of the report are particularly useful at this stage. If there the team members disagree, then you must continue your work.

When it is clear that the team is certain that the report does meet the tests, announce, “This report is now locked, and the team has completed its work. Congratulations.” Explain that locked means that the team has signed off on the report, that it is finished with the report. At this point only you as chair will have the authority to change any word in it. Words will change in the editing process, but you must approve and actually make each change suggested by an editor. Your charge is to ensure that the language of the report stays true to what the team actually said and what it meant to imply.

However, even though the team does not formally use the tests for the report until the last day of a visit, you should introduce them early and encourage team members to use them as tools throughout the week.

The test of fairness

This test is whether or not the team is certain that the report is fair.

A report is judged fair when the team has considered:

1. **Equity in delivery of education services between groups of students that result in differences in learning performance.** The team has written about the extent and nature of performance equity gaps between different groups.

2. **Differences in perspectives about key issues amongst key groups within the school.** Key issues are about the functioning of the school as a provider of good learning for students. The groups in the schools are the key role groups of the school (e.g. teachers, administrators, students, and parents). In addition, schools may also have groups that are defined by a certain shared perspective about a key issue of the school e.g. effectiveness of leadership.

   The team must build its knowledge of the different perspectives that exist in the school and what these perspectives actually mean in terms of how the school functions. This knowledge about school perspectives is a prerequisite for the team to decide if it has fairly treated the array of perspectives.

   It is unlikely that a report will be fair if the team has ignored a perspective it has seen.

The test of usefulness

The team applies the test of usefulness when it asks, "Have we written this report so that the participants of this school are most likely to say, 'I see what this team thinks we need to do to improve student learning.'"

At the beginning of the visit, you may have to be explicit that this test is not met simply by being positive about the school, or even by balancing observations that are "positive and negative." If your team is caught up in this simplistic paradigm, emphasize that experience shows that a report is most useful when a team is accurate about its evidence and clear about what it thinks, rather than when it tries to fool itself or the school by being nice.

A team should avoid taking stands on issues that it thinks will further enflame existing organizational, ideological or political divisions. It is usually extremely useful for a team to name such divisions and to point out the problems that the presence of such divisions causes for the school's learning and teaching performance. It is **not helpful** for a team to take a position on an issue that divides a school into warring camps.

Teams do not use single words or phrases that will enflame school participants.

Occasionally teams will decide that the school has spent a lot of energy on an approach to improving its teaching and learning that is either poorly conceived or implemented with critical flaws. The test of usefulness does imply that the team may applaud the school's effort. But, it does not imply that it should cheat the school by waffling on its judgment that the school is going down the wrong road, even though it knows it will be hard for the school to hear.

What the team thinks about how the school will respond when it first receives the report or what it imagines the press will say about the report are not indicators of the test of usefulness. What the team thinks the school might DO in response to the report over a two year period is a good criterion.

The better the team has come to understand how the school works, the more likely it will be able to write a report that is useful.

Test for persuasiveness

Visit reports often do not carry with them any pre-ordained authority that requires a school to follow a course of action. The test of the persuasiveness of a report is to ensure that the team assumes responsibility for its unusual knowledge of the school. It is expected to go the extra mile and write a report that will persuade the school to take effective action based on what it has learned.

Since team members do not receive feedback from the school while they are writing the report, it is difficult for them to test the persuasiveness of its report.

The team builds persuasiveness into the report while it is writing it; it does not add its persuasiveness at the end. Thus, the team's rigorous and thoughtful work in forming conclusions and the other sections of the report are what will make the report persuasive.

The quality and depth of the team's collective evidence and how well it uses that evidence has an adverse or a positive effect on the persuasiveness of the report. If a school thinks it could demonstrate that a conclusion is not accurate, then the process that conclusion comes into question, distracting the school from focusing on the important content of the conclusion.

Clear and direct language contributes to persuasiveness. If the team does not use education jargon, the report will be more persuasive with parents and the public, as well as teachers and school staff. In a similar vein, the team should avoid using buzzwords that it knows might stir debate that will distract readers from considering what the central findings of the report mean.

How successfully the team shapes the report to catch the uniqueness of the school will contribute directly to the report's persuasiveness. This includes using the same language and concepts that the school uses. It usually helps to catch the important phrases that the school uses to describe its ideal or actual program.

Finally, if a report is coherent throughout and its sections nest with each other—if the sections hang together and support one another—it will be more persuasive. Coherence depends on consistent style and language use. When report themes are built consistently through the document and clarified by the overall judgment of the team, they are 'nested.'