



Bringing Professional Practice into FOCUS

Catalpa Ltd.
873 Warwick Avenue
Warwick, RI 02888

401 467-5645
taw@catalpa.org
www.catalpa.org

HOW TO USE THE PBI[®] FOUNDATION ELEMENTS

A PBI[®] Guide

Catalpa Ltd.

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The PBI® Collection

Answers to the Basic Questions about 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.

Catalpa Ltd.
873 Warwick Avenue
Warwick, Rhode Island 02889

401-467-5645

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INTRODUCTION

This is a *Guide* to putting the PBI® *Foundation Elements* into practice. They are:

Dynamic Evidence

Professional Judgment

Team Deliberated-Consensus

The Foundations and Fundamentals of PBI® presents the historical and theoretical background on the three elements. This guide shows how visit team chairs should think about and use them in the work of conducting a team. This *Guide* will also be useful to those who wish to design a PBI® protocol.

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

The comments and work of SALT visit chairs, SALT staff, and more than 1,800 SALT team members were important sources of the revisions. Others were editors, critics and team participants in Chicago and England.

Principles about the *elements* that are presented in this *Guide* may or may not be required as part of a PBI® protocol. Please consult the *Catalpa Handbook for the Preparation, Review and Accreditation of a Practice-Based Inquiry® Visit Protocol* for current stipulations.

Thomas A. Wilson
Principal Partner

October 21, 2006

THE NATURE OF VISIT EVIDENCE

As in most methods of inquiry, the definition of evidence shapes how the team conducts many aspects of its visit. The collection of evidence is critical to a team's primary purpose: to generate information about what actually happens in the organization under study. A visit protocol must show a deliberate overriding concern that team members will immerse themselves in the collection and discussion of evidence.

As described in *Foundations and Fundamentals of Practice-Based Inquiry*[®], the definition of visit evidence is markedly different from conventional definitions of evidence used in research and inquiry disciplines. Visit evidence is what you see, hear, read and smell during the week in the institution. It is a small piece of the life of the institution that the team can quickly and orally describe while it is in the team room. The concrete aspect of conclusions ties them to the reality of the institution. This evidence is dynamic; it changes as the team's knowledge and judgment about the institution change.

The team describes evidence in the report by its source: e.g., following a student, observing classes.

Teams collect evidence about what actors in the institution do and tie that as closely as possible to evidence about what their perspective is about what they do—how they explain the reasons for what they do or the meaning of what they do. The collection of evidence is an overriding, deliberate concern in the design of a visit protocol, a visit schedule, the structure of team discussions and the report format. The rigor of a team's conclusions and the value of its report will be determined by how deeply the team looks for evidence and how thoroughly it collects and uses that evidence.

A chair must make this concern real for her team in the conduct of the visit.

The definition of visit evidence is dynamic. Examples of evidence change during the course of the visit. For instance, during the first day of an institution visit, it might be a simple descriptive statement such as "students are restless in classes." That might evolve to a statement in a conclusion such as: "the teachers' frustration with their futile efforts to deal with their students' restlessness is heightened by the institution's indifference to the different learning capabilities of their diverse students."

The team must list two sources of evidence for each conclusion and must include in the report its master list of all sources of evidence that it considered during the visit.

THE NATURE OF PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT ON A TEAM

The visit methodology seeks to use the diverse judgments of individual team members as key tools of the team's inquiry, rather than to avoid or diminish these judgments in order to build an "objective" report.

Rather than seeking to eliminate the voice of individual team members, the visit protocol seeks to harness these voices into a unified perception and voice. This has proved to be a powerful and flexible tool of inquiry.

The central admonishment for the visit inquiry is, "Know what you see, rather than see what you know." A central part of professional judgment is the knowing what you see.

Each team member works to develop the overall professional judgment of the team. While the team determines its overall judgment of the institution under study, it builds that judgment upon the professional judgments of each individual team member, which includes the judgment each one actually uses in thinking about how well that institution is performing at its central function, e.g. learning and teaching.

The team expects its members to share what they are thinking about the institution in team discussions that are held several times during the visit. The visit should compel individual team members to discuss their early perceptions. At the same time team members should continually test their individual perceptions, as well as the team's early generalizations about the institution, by holding them up to the evidence they have found. They should be willing to use the light of evidence to transform their individual perceptions so that they are able to see through them and build a unified team judgment. The "reporting back" sessions and countless informal team discussions are the forum of the team's judgment.

The growing team's judgment usually provides a clear understanding of where the team is going and why. More often team members will agree, rather than disagree, about where their collective perspectives are leading them. When these perceptions gel at some point, they will form the corporate professional judgment of the team as a whole.

This process requires each team member to be responsible for entering what he sees and thinks into the team discussions. It

requires individual team members to test their personal views against the evidence gathered by the team. It makes it irrelevant for a team member to advocate for the agenda of any outside interest group (e.g. librarians, unions, parents), and this becomes easier for the team to control. The process strongly supports the team's sense of what is accurate and fair to conclude in its report.

Professional judgment—both that of individual team members and particularly that of the team as a whole—evolves during the visit. The team makes its professional judgment explicit in its report, through what might be called “the team's voice.”

The strength of the team's judgment about the institution by the end of the visit is surprising. The team is usually very certain it has found a good handle on what is going on in the institution. Nevertheless, a team's judgment of an institution is never final, infallible or static.

The sections that follow describe how judgment works as a tool for the team.

HOW THE TEAM USES JUDGMENT TO MAKE CONCLUSIONS

A team visiting a school could easily agree that the following statement is accurate:

Student artwork is displayed on the hall walls of the school.

This is not a conclusion; it is a description. In fact, it deliberately evades saying what the team actually thinks about the artwork or what it thinks about the value of hanging it on the walls. It provides no hooks on which the people in the institution can hang their ideas about what they might or might not do about it. It leaves the institution flat. Judgment is the hook to action. The above sentence does not pass the test for “contains judgment,” which requires the team to make its shared thinking about the conclusion visible to the institution.

The following statement contains judgment throughout:

Student artwork, which is linked to what teachers are currently teaching, is displayed throughout the public spaces in the school. This excellent student work, mixed with drawings and digital photographs, shows students taking important risks in what they are trying to do. Students are proud of this display, and it promotes their interest in doing work that meets high standards.

This statement leaves no ambiguity about what the team thinks about the display. It passes the test that a conclusion must contain judgment. It indicates the careful deliberation of the team.

The team uses its judgment as a tool to check its conclusions and to shape its final report so that it is constructive for the institution. The requirement that teams show their judgment in each of its conclusions makes what the team means much clearer. It gives the institution further ground for accepting or rejecting a team finding, since it can consider how the team viewed its practice.

In the visit, the use of evidence and deliberate consensus make it possible for the team to generate a unified, informed professional judgment.

HOW THE TEAM USES JUDGMENT TO WRITE ITS REPORT

The final report must speak from the “team’s voice.” This becomes concrete, when the chair explains to the team, “Our report must show what we, as a team, think about what we are saying. It is not enough simply to describe this institution.” While the team clearly indicates what it thinks in the summary sections of its report, the requirement goes further than that. The team must agree that each final conclusion passes the required test that it contains the judgment of the whole team.

By the end of the fourth day of the visit, the team usually will have successfully generated an overview judgment of the institution; it will have decided what issues are most important to include in its report. The team must build this overview judgment and support it with evidence it has collected about that institution, and all team members must agree with it. That agreement is often surprisingly strong.

The closer the team comes to building an agreed upon overall judgment of the institution, the easier its work will become.

HOW THE TEAM USES JUDGMENT TO MAKE DECISIONS

The team not only uses professional judgment to write its conclusions and the report, but it also uses it to make decisions throughout the visit.

Especially in the beginning, the chair plays a critical leadership role in helping the team effectively use its own judgment to make these decisions.

During the course of the visit, the team makes many decisions about:

- What are the most important issues for the team to address?
- Does the team have enough consistent evidence to support a conclusion?

How can the team collect further evidence to resolve questions?

How will the team word a conclusion?

What content will the team include in the summary sections of the report?

Do the team's conclusions and report meet their respective tests?

Can the team modify its visit schedule?

How will the team handle the unusual situations that arise?

HOW TO HELP THE TEAM USE ITS PROFESSIONAL JUDGMENT IN WRITING VISIT CONCLUSIONS

The team's judgment can show up in a conclusion in very different ways. Effective use of judgment progresses through the examples.

UNSPECIFIED JUDGMENT

This sentence contains implicit, unspecified judgment:

Rick unfortunately drives his car frequently when the gas warning light is on.¹

The word "unfortunately" shows the reader that the writer thinks that this is not good practice, but the reason for that judgment is not specified. (Sometimes this is a good strategy because it allows the reader to think of all the reasons why this practice is unfortunate.)

SPECIFIED JUDGMENT

A specified judgment spells out the reasoning:

Rick unfortunately drives his car frequently when the gas warning light is on. This increases the likelihood that he will be stranded far from a gas station and be subject to all sorts of inconveniences.

LISTING JUDGMENTS

The paragraph below contains a list of judgments. It doesn't add up to much of anything, and it doesn't do well against the required test of asking, "So what?" In a similar way, a list of sentences that describe the institution doesn't meet the requirements of asking, "So what?" (The test for importance.)

Rick unfortunately drives his car frequently when the gas warning light is on. He also lets his tires go bald, which is a dangerous practice. The windshield wipers lack blades, which

¹ Thanks to Rick Richards, Director of SALT at the Rhode Island Department of Education, for the examples. His understanding of the importance of perspective has made a major contribution to the visit methodology.

Yet, in the interest of accuracy, it is important to know he came up with these the day after he rode in my car when its gas warning light was on. However, the tires were not bald. --Tom Wilson

means he cannot see when there is mud, snow or rain on his windshield.

COHERENT JUDGMENT

The paragraph below contains forthright judgment, which pulls the evidence together and ties it to the whole conclusion so that the central point the writer is making is quite clear.

Rick unfortunately drives his car frequently when the gas warning light is on. He also lets his tires go bald, which is dangerous practice. The windshield wipers lack blades, which means he cannot see when there is mud, snow or rain on his windshield. This pattern of careless neglect severely compromises the safety with which Rick operates his vehicle and creates substantial danger to himself and other drivers.

ACTION, PERSPECTIVE OF THE INSTITUTION, TEAM PERCEPTIONS AND JUDGMENT

Teams have little trouble understanding that the evidence they collect is about the *action* of the institution—about what professionals and clients do; about the institution’s practice.

It is more difficult for them to understand that good visit evidence also includes evidence about the *perspective the institution has* of what it does—about how it perceives its own action. *Perspective* is what members of the institution think about what they do and how they explain why things are as they are. *Perspective* refers to the how constituents understand an institution – both the people, events and ideas within the institution, as well as the people and forces outside who either control it or whose lives are influenced by it.

We call what team members think about the institution’s action *perceptions*. What team members think about the institution, when they enter the door on the first day of the visit, we call *preconceptions*. The team’s *professional judgment* is formed from the individual *perceptions* of team members, which have been challenged by evidence they find in the institution while they are visiting it.

HOW EVIDENCE ABOUT THE INSTITUTION’S PERSPECTIVE HELPS THE INQUIRY

We have found that a team’s knowledge of *perspective* strengthens the accuracy and importance of its conclusions and the *fairness* and *persuasiveness* of its report.

Knowing the institution’s perspective about what it does strengthens the accuracy of the report because the team must grapple with it, as well as with the perception of each team member. Often these perspectives will differ. This discontinuity serves to raise further questions in the team’s mind about what is accurate and why. This leads the team to dig further for more evidence and to build better, more accurate perceptions. From that comes the base for accurate generalizations about the issue at hand.

Understanding the nature of the differences and/or similarities in the perspectives of the institution gives the team important knowledge for writing a report that directly addresses the central issues at the heart of that institution.

It also prevents the team from omitting the view of a constituent group in its final report, which would result in a less fair report.

THE INSTITUTION'S PERSPECTIVE IS A COLLECTION OF THE PERSPECTIVES OF THE INSTITUTION'S CONSTITUENT GROUPS

The team should think of the *institution's perspective* as being made up of the perspectives of all of its *constituent groups*. For a school, this includes students, teachers, the institutional administration, parents and the district administration. The fact that these perspectives are sometimes the same and sometimes different is an important puzzle for the team to solve, when it is trying to come to its own understanding of the particular dynamics of the institution.

For each constituent group in the institution, teams should come to an understanding of:

What that group does.

What that group thinks about what it does.

What the team thinks about what that group does.

SOME QUESTIONS TO ASK TO GENERATE EVIDENCE ABOUT THE INSTITUTION'S PERSPECTIVE

Questions for members of the institution community that will lead to evidence about perspective include:

Why do you think that happened?

How well do you think it went?

After watching a class in a school, ask the teacher: What do you think about what happened? Why did you teach the class the way you did? Did it turn out the way you hoped? Do you think the institution supports you in your teaching?

In a discussion with a parent, teacher or administrator, ask: What do you think about your institution's plan to improve its practice? How useful is it? Why is it written the way it is?

In a discussion with a teacher or administrator, ask: What do you think about the math curriculum you are using? Why are you using that curriculum? Do you think it works well?

Questions that will help you understand the pattern of perspectives in the institution:

After you have heard about the individual's view, ask: Do you think other _____ (members of the person's group) share your view? Would they agree with you?

**EXAMPLES FOR A SCHOOL OF AREAS AND ISSUES THAT MAY GENERATE
IMPORTANT PATTERNS OF PERSPECTIVE FOR THE TEAM TO UNDERSTAND**

The leadership of the principal

The new curriculum

The diversity of students

The Union

The regulations of the state's Department of Education

Discipline in the school

Parental involvement

Rising or falling test scores

The support of the school's district

A new schedule

BUILDING TEAM DELIBERATED CONSENSUS

Remember that team deliberated consensus is both a process to push the team's inquiry and a process of decision making. The team members will reach deliberate agreement only by discussing the evidence they have gathered and what this evidence means to the team.

Teachers will sometimes say they agree in order to show that they are team players or that they are "nice." This can dilute, rather than enrich, the critical human interactions of a peer team conducting an inquiry.

Teams are likely to think that any disagreements they have are because of team dynamics or because individual team members have different perspectives rather than because of the evidence the team has gathered. Teams will disagree about general ideas or constructs about what should be happening in the institution. The chair's task is to redirect the team discussions so that the team is focused on what it thinks about the evidence it has collected about the particular institution it is visiting.

As team members begin work, the chair must be especially deliberate in seeking their agreement on each issue. As the team's work continues, it becomes less necessary for the chair to be so deliberate, as long as she has firmly established the ground rule that any team member will speak up, if he does not agree with a decision the team is making.

Don't encourage the team to overwork a conclusion for the sole purpose of promoting team agreement. That will lead to shallow agreement. When team members do agree on important conclusions, it is a good strategy to work the team hard. If you want team members to experience the result of the hard work of writing a good conclusion, ask them to select an important issue about which they already agree.

When discussion becomes difficult, because the team is not sure about the evidence it has gathered or about what its judgment of that evidence is, it is a good strategy to say, "Let's think about it some more, collect additional evidence and discuss it further tomorrow."

Remember, it is the exploration of the evidence by the team members that increases the team's certainty. That happens when the team it finally agrees that it has the right evidence. It is also the grist of the rich professional reward that comes from serving on a team.

DISAGREEMENT WORKS

Team members are often surprised by how much they agree. Too many teachers (and other practitioners within agencies) have learned that serious discussions about how well practice is being conducted in their agency leads to unproductive disagreement, either about the relevance of information to measure performance or even about what constitutes “good practice.”

Visit team members find productive agreement because they are working to make sense of the evidence from the actual life of the institution and to build a coherent judgment as a team about that institution.

Part of the reason it works is that, when team members disagree, they are not locked into a position of trying to win an argument. The team’s task is clear: to generate the evidence and write good conclusions. They soon discover that disagreement is a tool of their inquiry. Team disagreement and discontinuities in evidence play an important role in a team’s final certainty in the accuracy of the report. They also contribute directly to the quality of the substance of the report.

The chair must become facile at managing disagreement among team members, but for the purpose of furthering the inquiry, she should not allow the team to agree for agreement’s sake. Sometimes the chair must generate disagreement among team members, when they are ready to sit back and bask in simple evidence, which they think is consistent and positive. Sometimes the team sets mirrors to hold the evidence in place in order to meet simpler standards than those of the Practice-Based Inquiry. Breaking these mirrors is necessary and can bring the team good fortune.

WORKING WITH DISAGREEMENT

The chair must make judgments about whether a team’s agreement is solid and based on evidence or if it is contrived. These diagnostic judgments of the chair will alter the chair’s strategies of handling disagreement.

The following suggestions are to help the chair make team deliberated consensus a productive tool for each team member. Shaping these strategies for a particular inquiry is among the most important tasks of the chair.

The chair must remember that the team’s job is **NOT** to reach agreement on every issue. Too much emphasis on agreement, as the team’s purpose, will weaken the inquiry. For a number of reasons, both good and bad, teams highly value agreement for its

own sake. This is particularly true within current groups of teachers. Because of this, the chair must be explicit about the value of disagreement and be sure that the team does not see agreement as its ultimate goal. Many teams, in fact, do come to a point where they are amazed by how much they understand and agree about the institution, but this is an indirect result of the process, and not a goal.

The team's job is to ascertain what it does agree about and what it sees as the substance of its public, written conclusions. The team leaves everything else behind and keeps it confidential.

The major sources of discontinuities that lead the chair to take different strategies include:

Accurate evidence

Ask:

“What evidence are we not sure about?”

“Why?”

“How do we collect more evidence to resolve this?”

Conflict about the importance of individual, initial perceptions

When team members disagree and when they are arguing about constructs about institutions that exist in debates outside of this institution, the chair must push them back to the actual evidence about the institution.

Ask:

What evidence from the institution did you have in mind when you made your statement?

Did you actually see “that” in the institution?

Are you talking about 1) what you saw? *or* about 2) what you think you should have seen?

How do you separate the evidence you saw from what you think about that evidence?

Disagreement about what should be said and in what manner

Diagnose the conceptual problem the team faces and name it in its discussion. Some examples of conceptual problems are:

The pieces of evidence fit together, but the team is reluctant to write the conclusion the evidence

supports. The argument then is often about “How nice we should be?”

The evidence seems to fit together, but the team hasn’t quite figured out how to say it.

Focus first on the central point the team wishes to make and then on the evidence the team has gathered to support that point.

Rework the language of the conclusion to make it clearer by writing in direct and active language.

Combine one conclusion with another one.

Start over.

Interpersonal conflicts on the team

The emphasis on good group dynamics in professional development circles leads team members to think that interpersonal conflicts are the major source of a team’s disagreements.

This view challenges the chair to lead the team to the elements of the visit as inquiry.

Assure team members that their disagreement is key to the process of building the team’s conclusions. If there were no disagreements, you would be worried.

WHEN AGREEMENT IS DISTANT

Difficult discussions often have a positive, although sobering, effect on a team. They clarify the team’s limits, as well as its overall view of what it wants to say and what it can say to the institution. That clarity speeds up the team’s deliberations.

In the heat of a debate, the usual inclination is to push so that one side dominates. Once that type of argument begins, you need to push the team back to the evidence to see if a new understanding will emerge that will satisfy all team members. If not, at some point you may, in fact, have a conclusion that cannot be written, because the team does not agree for whatever reason.

When you think that is possible, then you should switch to a “closing the conclusion strategy.”

Remind the team of the rule about team deliberated consensus. And that time is passing. You will give them a limited time to see if they can tie up their conversation and move on to the rest of the report. It is a good strategy to suggest, before the team gives up,

that you will return to this issue and decide on this conclusion later.

This strategy usually unfreezes the argument and returns the team to a place where it can consider what is happening and what position it wants to take. Sometimes it gives teams a new and better resolve to let go of initial perceptions that all team members do not share or that have become obstructions to the team's progress or that hide rather than reveal evidence. If one person is holding out for an external standard or an initial perception (e.g. full compliance with special education regulations), you should point that out to the individual, remind him that he has had many chances to convince the team of his point of view and that his personal position is obstructing agreement on this conclusion.

At the end of the day, if the team cannot agree on what it wants to say but can agree that an issue is critical for the institution to consider, the team can say exactly that in its conclusion.