Medium Search Get app Write Sign up Sign in

How can we use theory of change in design practice?


kim shore Follow 6 min read · Sep 13, 2022

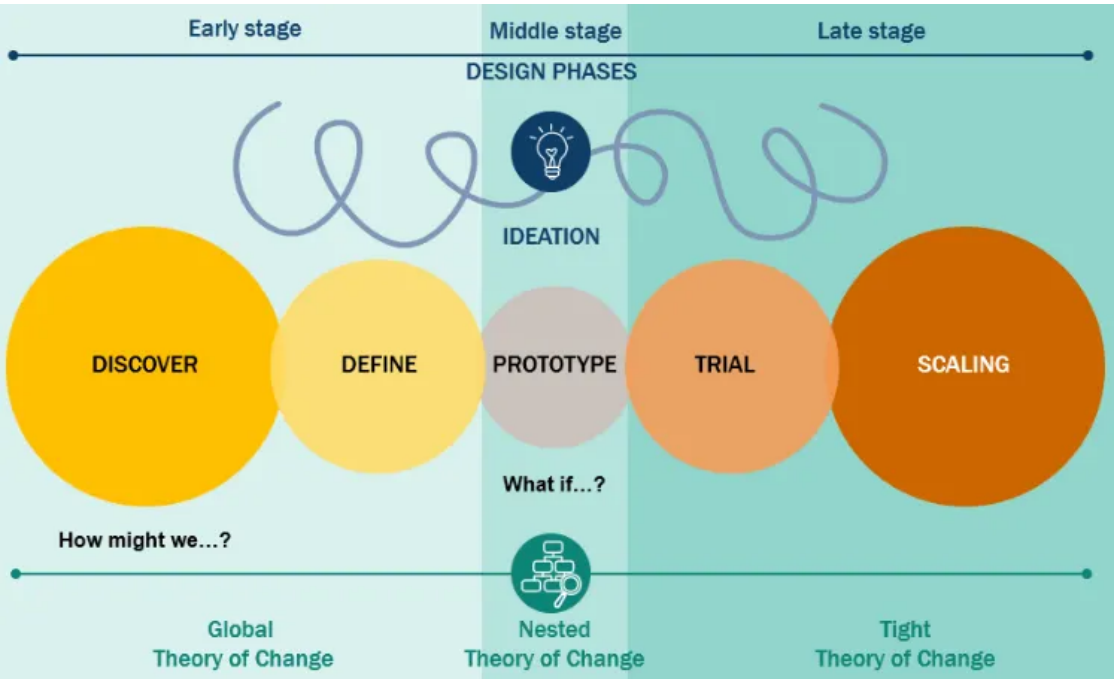
150 1

Disclosure: I recently completed Clear Horizon's Theory of Change for Design short course in early 2022. In return for my participation in the course, I offered to write this article. This is an authentic account of my learnings and reflections for future learners.

How the course is taught

The course runs for six weeks, composed of e-learning content and modules, supported by a one hour virtual learning session with mentors and peers. The content was a concise distillation of practice wisdom and theory, aimed at supporting practitioners.

The course frames a theory of change framework within a *typical* sequence of a design process. Clear Horizons use the following design model to integrate theory of change for design — the design process model is based on their partnership with the The Australian Centre for Social Innovation:



TACSI & Clear Horizons model for integrating TOC for design

What value does theory of change bring to design?

Previously, I have wondered if the emergent, creative and futures focused work of design is at odds with the objective, linear, causal work of evaluation? However, the longer I practice design and innovation, the more I realise the importance of strategic, outcomes focused thinking to:

- Create a common narrative and vision among all stakeholders.
- Critically think through how your initiative will bring about change.
- Help your design team develop and implement impactful change by having a systematic approach against which to test action and ideas against desired outcomes.
- Be clear about the boundaries of the system you are aiming to influence.

While I continue to hold questions and critiques about theory of change for design (see below) — I can now see the value of theory of change when understood as an iterative and strategic tool, as taught in this course.

Get kim shore's stories in your inbox

Join Medium for free to get updates from this writer.

Enter your email Subscribe

Remember me for faster sign in

Jess Dart and other practitioners who lead the course (with decades of experience in theory of change in evaluating public services, aid and social innovation) have lots of wisdom and techniques to share. They distilled theory of change into clear and concise methods and tools for practitioners.

Key lessons about what theory of change is that I did not know before:

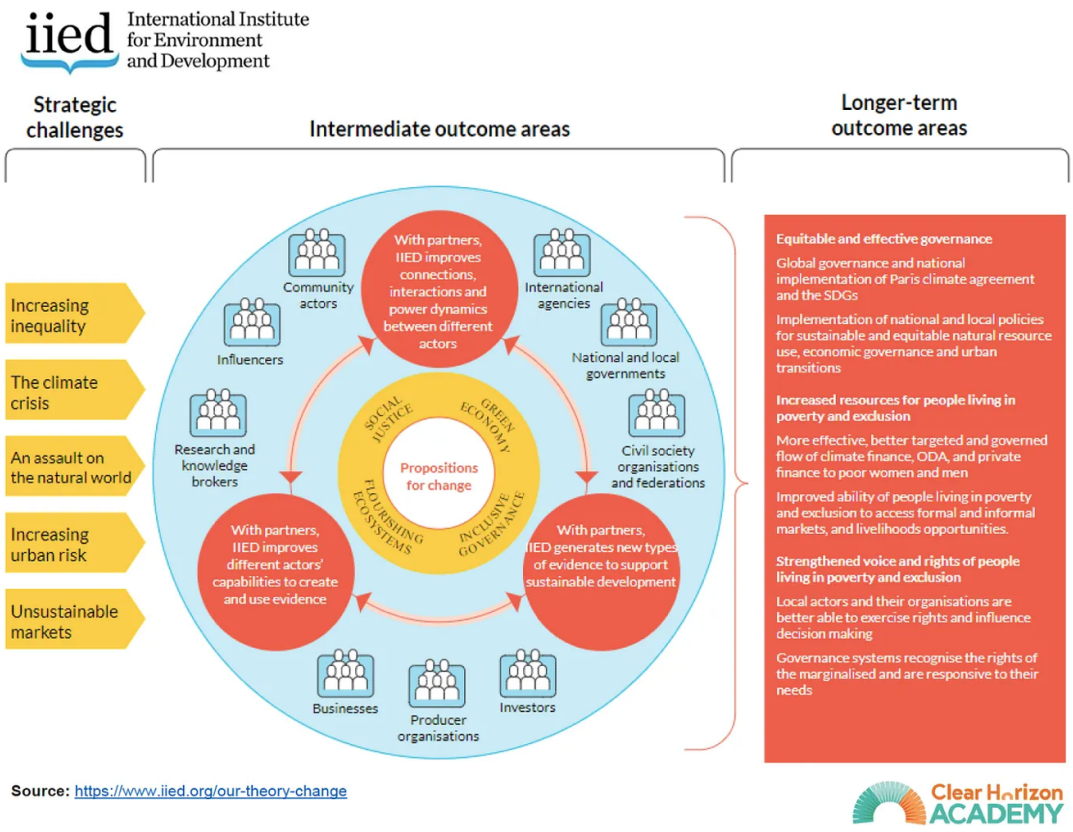
- Theory of change focuses only on the ultimate outcomes and intermediate outcomes — what changes your initiative will lead to. The theory of action (activities) comes later. This was a light bulb moment for me because I could see that the theory of change could be part of the vision and goal setting part of a project, without prescribing or limiting the generative and explorative part of design (activities, services, product etc).
- Theory of change is an iterative process — when working with complex systems and engaging in explorer research, we are constantly learning new insights and busting assumptions. And so, the theory of change is iterative, increasing in fidelity and rigour as you move from early stages toward the pilot.
- Building and testing a theory of change with all stakeholders, including the people we are designing for, early in the process enables you to question bias, understand what needs to change and for who, and brings equity and social justice into the picture.

Key lessons about how to use theory of change in design

- **Look for synergies between design and evaluation:** the sequence of steps

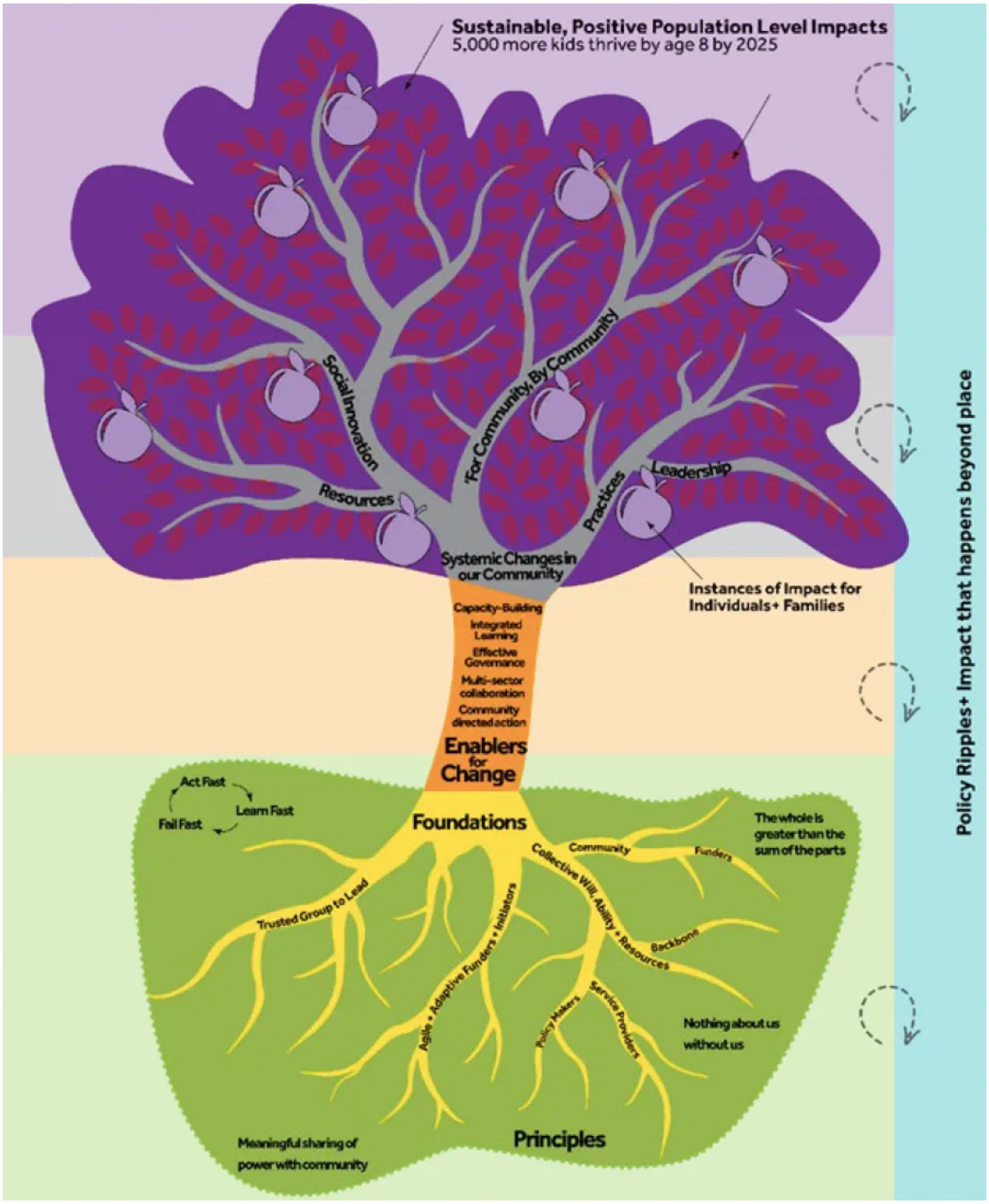
for doing theory of change sits comfortably within a typical design process. For example, the scoping and discovery work can serve two purposes: informing the design research objectives focused on understanding context, community and needs, as well as the evaluation objectives focused on understanding plausible causal pathways of change.

- **There is no one way to map your theory of change**: there is no one way to map out causal pathways into a theory of change. The approach taken depends on your aims, constraints and priorities. You can start from the outcomes and work backwards, start from the activities and work upwards, or start with a problem tree. One approach that was new to me was a people-centred approach that includes mapping social networks to understand lines of influence, which is useful for initiatives aimed at changing behaviour.
- **Think about different roles**: Clear Horizon recommends facilitating a process of iterative theory of change development throughout the design cycle, and suggests having an impact lead or evaluation lead to take ownership of the process. Personally, I have tried doing developmental evaluation while also leading a program design process, and it definitely caused pain in the brain! And might well have compromised the rigour of our theory of change.
- **Communicate a narrative for impact:** think about who is using this theory of change and what is the story it tells? We want our design to create the change we envision. If we can communicate our theory of change within a narrative people care about, people are more likely to participate, support and embody that change. Here is a couple of examples of visualizing a theory of change shared with us:



Source: https://www.iied.org/our-theory-change

Clear Horizon ACADEMY



A creative TOC proposal, referenced here: https://www.dss.gov.au/new-framework-and-toolkit-for-evaluating-place-based-delivery-approaches

Reflections and questions

As design continues to be called on to renew, redesign and make change across diverse domains, working with evaluation tools to improve our rigour and ethics is a positive sign of a maturing practice. Questions that emerged for me as I reflect on building more rigour into design practice:

Evaluation in complex systems

Top highlight

Often we are designing in complex social systems, characterised by systemic properties such as emergence, unknowns, and feedback loops. So it was good to see the course include the negative theory of change — how an intervention may lead to unintended consequences — developed by Carol Weiss. In my view, we should always be thinking critically about the possible negative and positive impacts of our design work and interventions.

The course recommends baking in a culture of learning, monitoring and evaluation into the pilot and continuous design and development. This allows for continuous learning, improvement and validation. This is something to aspire to.

Can evaluation increase the scope of design ethics?

Beyond a single project, perhaps a theory of change toolkit can offer social designers a way to apply a more ethical and critical lens to social problems? For example, many new technologies are not creating the visions and goals that designers might hope for as part of good social design and a healthy society. Many new digital technologies are designed without an open, accountable theory of change, and the intention and goals behind the technology design are in a black box — closing the doors to scrutiny.

As the fields of systemic and social design grow, perhaps designers can work with global change models to articulate new narratives and visions for how social design can create large scale social good. The promise here is to not only tell a story about what change we need, but to also employ creative design skills to make change a reality.

How does evaluation sit with design ontologically? In other words, how do our respective cultures influence our ways of being?

If the designer is doing this evaluation work while designing, how might that affect the designer's role and way of being? Could spending more time thinking about causal pathways distract the designer from the more imaginative, reflective and creative work of design?

Closing words

I am sure the team at Clear Horizon would engage in dialogue about these last questions, so I do not intend to finish with these reflections as a facetious comment about what was missed. Rather, all good learning and education should open the door to deeper questions, so thank you for giving me a nudge to make this inquiry.

Kim Shore

Design Social Innovation | Strategic Design | Design Thinking | Impact Measurement



Written by kim shore

265 followers · 307 following

Systemic Design | Education Innovation | Resilience & Renewal | Director & Co-founder, Reciproca | FRSA

Follow

Responses (1)

Write a response

What are your thoughts?



Steven Sullivan
Oct 3, 2022

Nice to see it mapped like this.

Reply

More from kim shore



kim shore · Feb 23, 2025

The Compassionate Systems Framework: an approach to...

A perspective and provocation on why we need to learn about how to enliven systems ...

84 1

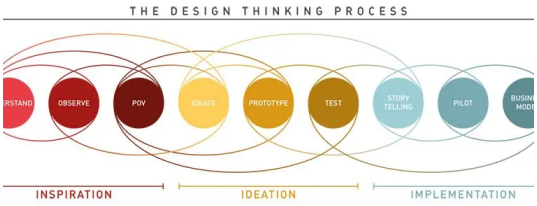


kim shore · Feb 10, 2023

A Compassionate Systems Leadership Retreat: Reflections o...

After two years in lockdown, participating in a compassionate systems leadership retreat i...

32



kim shore · Nov 30, 2017

Designing a climate data platform, enabling climate services

This article sets out four key insights about designing solutions in the field of climate da...

7



kim shore · Feb 5, 2025

Provocations for climate positive education in Tasmania

I had the privilege of presenting a provocation, alongside Mette Boelle (MIT)...

See all from kim shore

Help Status About Careers Press Blog Store Privacy Rules Terms Text to speech