

LESSON 4: Designing for Impact: Project Planning and Theory of Change



TOTAL TIME:
60 minutes

Objectives

Students will be able to:

- Construct a theory of change that connects their project actions to a specific, desired outcome.
- Develop a realistic project plan
- Identify potential obstacles and adaptive strategies to keep their project on track.

Guiding Questions

- What's the difference between doing something good and doing something effective?
- If your project works exactly as planned, what will be different in your community — and how will you know?
- What assumptions are you making about how change happens? Are they valid?

Materials

- Theory of Change & Project Plan worksheet

Differentiation Strategies

For students who need more support:

- Provide a pre-filled theory of change template with one completed example students can model from.
- Allow students to work in pairs to develop a shared project plan before drafting individual mission steps.

For advanced learners:

- Ask students to identify two competing theories of change for the same issue and analyze the trade-offs.
- Have students conduct a “pre-mortem”: imagine the project failed — what went wrong, and how could the plan be redesigned to prevent it?

Extension

- Students interview someone who has run a community project or campaign and report back: What was their theory of change? Did it hold up? What did they change along the way?
- Students create a one-page project pitch (written or visual) that they could present to a potential funder, community partner, or school administrator to gain support.

Where could this fit?



- ELA: Argument writing — a theory of change is essentially a causal argument. Students can practice writing claims, evidence, and warrants using their project logic.
- Social Studies / Government: Policy analysis; compare your theory of change to how a real policy was designed. Did policymakers use similar logic? Did it work?
- Math / Statistics: Measurement and metrics — how do you operationalize “success”? Explore sample sizes, baselines, and what counts as evidence of change.
- After-school / At home: Ask a parent or community member: Have you ever tried to change something? What did you do, and did it work?

Introduction

- Ask: “Have you ever tried to fix something and had it go sideways — not because you didn’t care, but because the plan wasn’t right? Today is about building plans that actually work.”
- Introduce the concept of a theory of change: effective action isn’t just about doing something good — it’s about understanding why your specific action will lead to a specific result.
- Use a brief example: A student who wants to reduce food waste at school collects data, partners with the cafeteria, and tracks results — versus one who just puts up a poster. Both care. Only one has a theory of change.
- Frame what’s ahead: “By the end of today, you’ll have a project plan with a real goal, a clear strategy, and a way to measure whether it’s working. This is what separates a project from a wish.”



10
minutes

Direct Instruction



15
minutes

- Introduce the components of a theory of change. Walk students through each layer:
 - **Problem:** What specific condition are you trying to change? For whom? Where?
 - **Root cause:** Why does this problem exist? What is maintaining it?
 - **Intervention:** What specific action will you take, and why do you believe it will address the root cause?
 - **Output:** What will you directly produce or do (events, resources, conversations)?
 - **Outcome:** What will change as a result of your output — in attitudes, behaviors, or conditions?
 - **Impact:** What longer-term change does your outcome contribute to?

Guided Practice



15
minutes

- Introduce the concept of assumptions: a theory of change only works if the assumptions connecting each layer are valid. Name one explicitly: “If we assume students don’t recycle because they don’t know how, then education should work. But what if the real barrier is inconvenience? The theory breaks.”
- Guide students to share either examples of assumptions that might come up with their projects.

Independent Practice



- Ask students to complete the Theory of Change & Project Plan worksheet. They should fill in each layer: problem, root cause, intervention, output, outcome, impact, and key assumptions.
- In pairs, have students share their theories of change and challenge each other's assumptions: "Is that really why this problem exists? What else might be causing it?"

Reflection



- After pairs share, facilitate a brief whole-class discussion. Ask: "What assumption do you think is most likely to break? What's your backup plan if it does?"
- Ask: "What assumption in your plan are you least certain about? What would it take to test it before you go too far?"
- Ask: "What's the smallest version of your project you could run in the next two weeks to learn whether your theory of change holds up?"
- Say: "Every project plan is a hypothesis. The goal isn't a perfect plan — it's a plan you're willing to test, learn from, and improve. That's how real change gets made."

Handouts



- Theory of Change & Project Plan

Icons:: SBTS; Flowicon; Gendis Studio; ARIPATUT DASUKI, Selot Lo from the Noun Project



Theory of Change & Project Plan

Explore a potential cause to work towards by completing the following prompts.

The problem I am trying to address is _____

This problem exists because (root cause) _____

My intervention is _____

I believe this will address the root cause because _____

My output (what I will directly produce or do) is _____

My outcome (what will change as a result) is: _____

My long-term impact goal is _____

My key assumption is _____

I will test this by _____

I will know my project is working when _____
