Connecting Project Principles and a Theory of Change to Practice: Departmental Action Teams

ASCN Transforming Institutions
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Departmental Action Team (DAT) Project: Presenters

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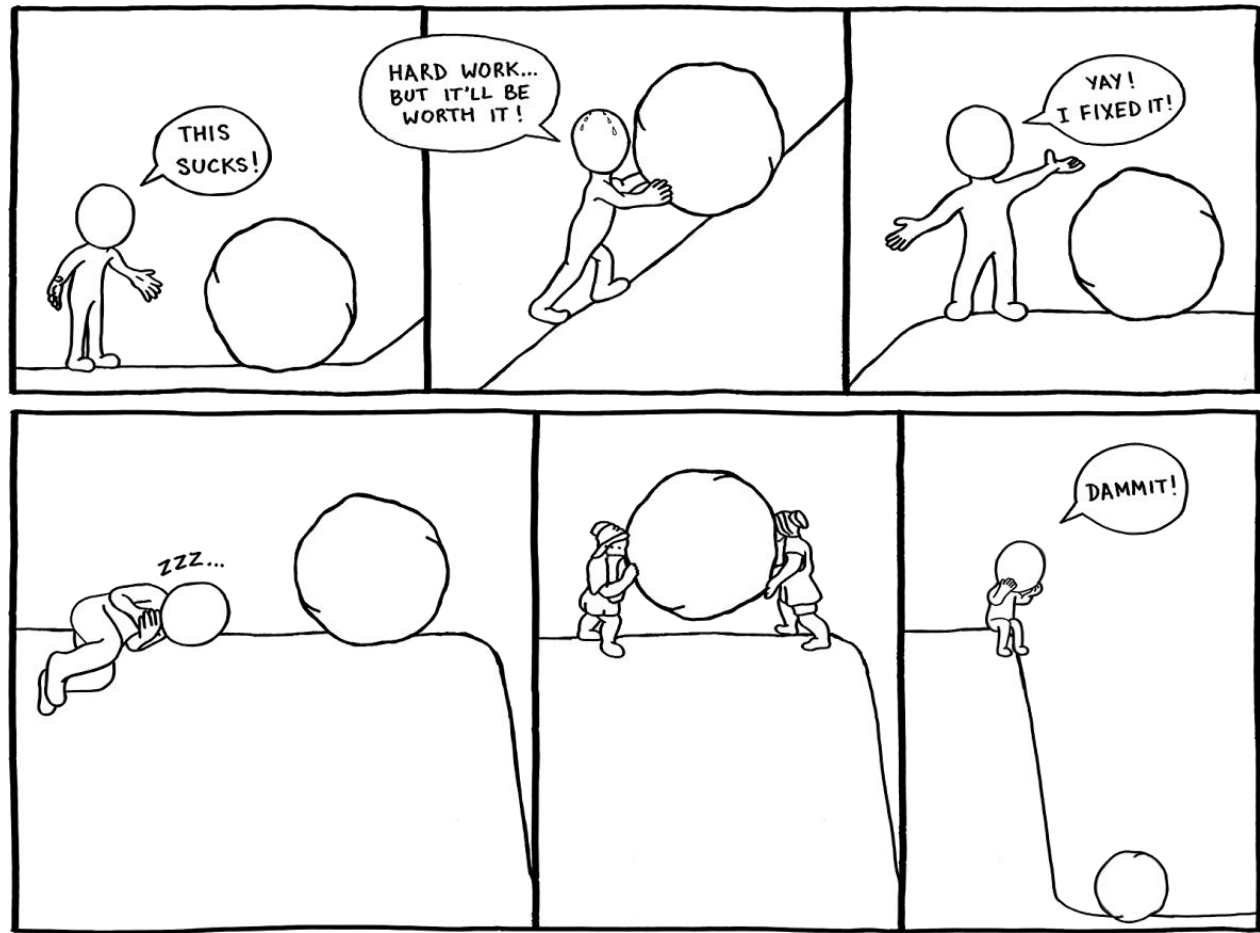(*she/her/hers*)
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The DAT Model
for sustained departmental change

Intentional cultural change is hard

What is a DAT?

A Departmental Action Team (DAT) is a departmentally-based working group of faculty, staff, and/or students with two goals:

1. to **create change** around a broad-scale undergraduate education issue by shifting departmental structures and culture

2. to help DAT participants **become change agents** through developing facilitation and leadership skills

Ngai et al., 2020. Facilitating Change in Higher Education: The Departmental Action Team Model.

Characteristics of a DAT

Membership: 6-10 members from a single department, diversity in roles (TT & NTT faculty, UG and G students, staff), demographics, perspectives

Facilitation: External to the department, co-facilitation model, explicit focus on process and team development

Timing: Meet once every other week for 60-90 minutes, for 2-4 semesters

Focus: Broad-scale issue related to undergraduate education, chosen/refined by participants through visioning process

Relationship to department: Supportive chair, regular communication to cultivate allies

Corbo et al. 2021. Departmental Change: Starting an Initiative

Impacts of Departmental Action Teams

- Driving department-wide curricular change
  - improved student experience; retention; accreditation support

- Catalyzing cultural and community change
  - increased representation; improved sense of belonging; better connections to employers; increased departmental engagement

- Developing the change agency of DAT members
  - sustained change in departments

Corbo et al. 2021. Departmental Change: Sustaining Impacts.

Impacts of Departmental Action Teams

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Corbo et al. 2021. Departmental Change: Sustaining Impacts.

The DAT Model has two foundations:

- **Theory of Change**
  - Step-wise explanation of how the DAT project's structure and activities lead to the desired outcome: departmental change

- **Project Principles**
  - Describe desired department and DAT cultural characteristics

- These guide our project design, facilitation, research, and evaluation

Developing the DAT Theory of Change

- Defined long-term outcome, outcomes, and stakeholders

- Three stages, each with several outcomes:
    - Before a DAT
    - Running a DAT
    - After a DAT (in progress)

- Used by facilitators to gauge DAT progress and anticipate how they will need to be supported through life cycle.

Ngai et al., 2020. Developing the Departmental Action Team Theory of Change.

DAT Project Principles

1. Students are partners in the educational process.

2. Work focuses on achieving collective positive outcomes.

3. Data collection, analysis, and interpretation inform decision making.

4. Collaboration among group members is enjoyable, productive, and rewarding.

5. Continuous improvement is an upheld practice.

6. Work is grounded in a commitment to equity, inclusion, and social justice.

Quan et al. 2019. Externalizing the Core Principles of the Departmental Action Team Model.

Connecting Principles and TOC to Practice:

The Divination DAT's story

Chronology of the Divination DAT

Beginning: The Divination department requested support in revising their programmatic student learning outcomes (SLOs) after failing to make progress at departmental meetings.

Middle: The Divination DAT met every other week for four semesters. With the support of external facilitators they developed a collaborative team culture that embodied the core principles. Their work was guided by the TOC.

End: They produced revised student learning outcomes and tied them directly to an assessment plan that was approved by the rest of the department.

STARTING POINT

A department needs change but lacks internal capacity to enact change

OUTCOME 1

Facilitators, department members, and department leadership communicate about having a DAT in the department

OUTCOME 2

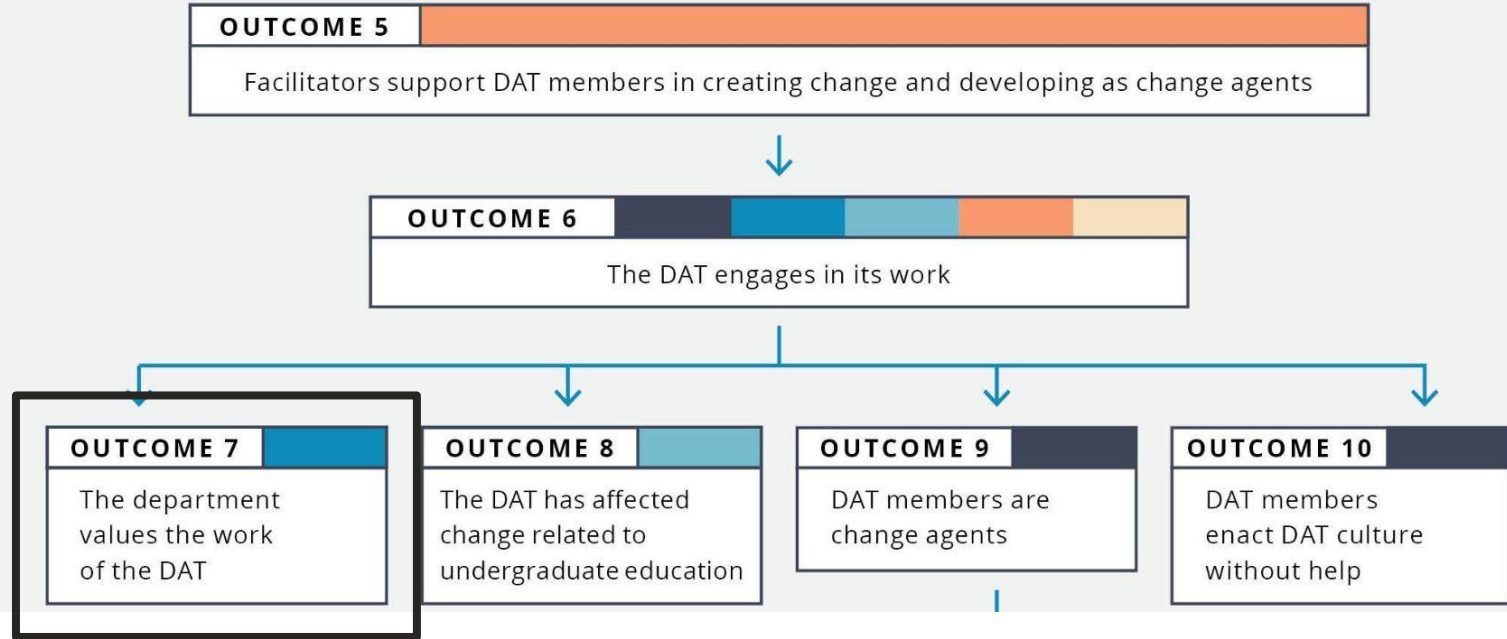There is external support for the DATs to form

OUTCOME 3

All stakeholders are ready to form a DAT

OUTCOME 4
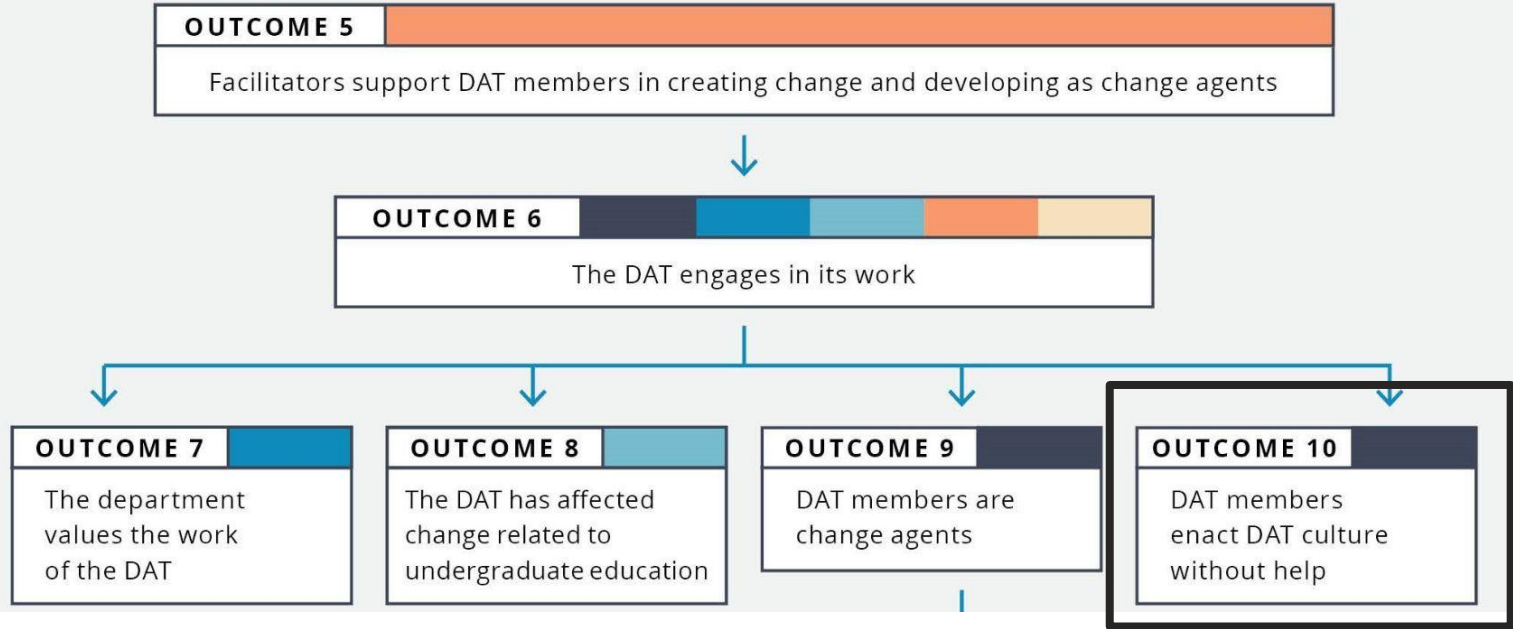
A DAT forms in the department

Outcome 1: Facilitators, dept members, and dept leadership communicate about having a DAT in the dept.

- Regular communication between department chair and DAT facilitators established - spent 6 months learning about dept context and needs

- **Principle 6 (inclusion and equity):** A diverse group of potential members, including students, were approached and invited to join the DAT, which was openly valued as service work for the dept.

STAGE 2: RUNNING A DAT

OUTCOME 5

Facilitators support DAT members in creating change and developing as change agents

OUTCOME 6

The DAT engages in its work

OUTCOME 7

The department values the work of the DAT

OUTCOME 8

The DAT has affected change related to undergraduate education

OUTCOME 9

DAT members are change agents

OUTCOME 10

DAT members enact DAT culture without help

Outcome 7: The dept values the work of the DAT.

- **Principle 2 (positive outcomes focus):** While DAT members revised the student learning outcomes, facilitators encouraged them to actively update the rest of the dept and provide opportunities for engagement

- **Principle 5 (continuous improvement):** As they developed the assessment plan, DAT members articulated potential ways the assessments would feed back into program improvement

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Outcome 10: DAT members enact DAT culture.

- **Principle 1 (students as partners):** Student members expressed they felt equal ownership of the DAT's work and that their contributions were meaningful.

- **Principle 4 (collaboration is productive and enjoyable):** *"But just in my position I've found that the norms have kind of helped me in student appointments, especially the probing for specificity and not assuming that I know what they mean...I think that's something that I wouldn't have necessarily done had I not been part of the DAT."*

Conclusions

- TOC and principles guide decision-making during program implementation

- TOC and principles can also support:

    - program design

    - anticipating key steps in implementation

    - anticipating pitfalls and barriers to change

    - providing a framework for research

Further Reading: Theory of Change and Principles

- Ngai, C., Corbo, J. C., Quan, G. M., Falkenberg, K., Geanious, C., Pawlak, A., Pilgrim, M. E., Reinholz, D. L., Smith, C. and Wise, S. Developing the DAT Theory of Change. In K. White, A. Beach, N. Finkelstein, C. Henderson, S. Simkins, L. Slakey, M. Stains, G. Weaver, and L. Whitehead (Eds.). *Transforming Institutions: Accelerating Systemic Change in Higher Education*. Pressbooks (2020).

- Vogel, I. (2012). ESPA guide to working with Theory of Change for research projects. ESPA Programme.

- Wolfe, S. M., Long, P. D., & Brown, K. K. (2020). Using a principles-focused evaluation approach to evaluate coalitions and collaboratives working toward equity and social justice. In A. W. Price, K. K. Brown, & S. M. Wolfe (Eds.), *Evaluating Community Coalitions and Collaboratives. New Directions for Evaluation,* 165, 45–65. https://doi.org/10.1002/ev.20404

- G. M. Quan, J. C. Corbo, N. D. Finkelstein, A. Pawlak, K. Falkenberg, C. Geanious, C. Ngai, C. Smith, S. Wise, M. E. Pilgrim, and D. L. Reinholz. Designing for institutional transformation: Six principles for department-level interventions. *Physical Review Physics Education Research* **15**, 010114 (2019).

Q&A—and for more about DATs:

■ Contact us & get quarterly DAT Newsletters:
https://tinyurl.com/DATContactForm

■ Book, pubs, free facilitation resources &
recorded webinars: **https://dat-project.org/**

Facilitating Change in Higher Education
The Departmental Action Team Model

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