Understand Culture and Context: Collaborating to End Homelessness

What is it?
Homelessness is a systemic problem without a single solution. For each person, a unique confluence of contextual factors combine to create the situations that lead to homelessness. Recognizing that each homeless person faces a unique set of challenges, Phoenix’s Human Services Campus creates unique solutions that draw across an ecosystem of over 20 collaborative partners in the Phoenix metropolitan area, illustrating PI Practice C2: “Understand Culture and Context.”

How does it support Principled Innovation?
Principled Innovation Practice C1 (“Understand Culture and Context”) is described in the framework in this way:

*Use evidence-based resources, empathy, reflective questioning, and asset-based appreciative inquiry to fully understand and assess the lived and current experiences and circumstances of individuals, communities, and learning environments.*

In Principled Innovation, we understand culture and context by recognizing that innovation cannot be one-size-fits-all. We engage others to develop solutions informed by the cultural wealth and unique, self-defined needs of the communities they impact. Before launching into problem-solving mode, it is important to take time to understand the culture and context surrounding a change or innovation that we’re looking to make. Drawing across the character assets of perspective taking, humility, curiosity, and empathy, PI Practice C1 involves genuinely listening to people, working to understand their experiences and digging into the relevant history, systems and structures in order to gain the practical wisdom needed to create effective solutions.

In this video, Phoenix’s Human Services Campus (HSC) illustrates the way that an organization creates solutions that are built on an understanding of the unique context of the individuals they serve. The organization honors its clients' needs and histories in drawing from a collaborative network of distributed expertise that centers humanity and dignity, providing individuals with the agency to decide on their plan for housing in a supportive and non-judgmental manner. Clients are provided with the autonomy to pursue their course of action with the support and guidance of these humanitarian leaders. Once clients are in permanent housing, they often find the desire to extend the same generosity, empathy and care they received to others. By building on a clear understanding of the unique challenges an individual faces, HSC’s model seeks to employ the PI asset of collaboration and
the PI practice of Systems Thinking (Practice I1) to select the particular combination of factors needed to create the PI aim of “positive change for humanity,” crafting solutions to innovatively address the stories of each individual they serve.

Use this video with pre-service teachers or principal licensure students to prompt a conversation about the unique confluence of contextual factors that create the challenges that students face and the PI character assets and practices that help us serve these students more effectively. These challenges may extend far beyond the boundaries of the IEPs provided by traditional student support services. A student may do well academically and behaviorally and yet still struggle with contextual factors such as abuse, discrimination, or other social or physical challenges both inside and outside the school walls. Principled Innovation seeks to understand the unique experiences that produce the challenges these students face and then seeks to serve these students by drawing upon school and community systems, whether those systems involve other students, faculty or staff members, or other organizations that can help a student feel welcome, connected, and supported.

What do I need?

- Time: 20 minutes
- Classroom or virtual setting

How do I use it?

Step 1: Prepare
Watch the video and read the “What is it” and “How does it support Principled Innovation” sections above. Read through the discussion questions provided below and consider how you yourself would respond.

Prepare to distribute the **PI Character Assets document** to all participants.

Step 2: Situate
Begin by providing the students this description of Practice C1 (“Understand Culture and Context”):

> Use evidence-based resources, empathy, reflective questioning, and asset-based appreciative inquiry to fully understand and assess the lived and current experiences and circumstances of individuals, communities, and learning environments.

Explain that we can’t design creative solutions without understanding the people who will use those solutions.

Distribute the **PI Character Assets document** to all participants, explaining as described above that PI brings these character assets together, creating a practical wisdom that seeks to address real problems through innovative solutions. Ask participants to watch the video with attention to the way that Practice C1 brings some of these character assets together at Phoenix’s HSC.

Step 3: Present
Present the video for the participants or have them watch it on their own.

Step 4: Discuss
Discuss the video in a group discussion (in-person or online).

Here are some questions to consider using:

1. At HSC, how does finding creative solutions build on the character assets of perspective taking, humility, curiosity, empathy, and collaboration? How do these character assets work together to give the staff at HSC the practical wisdom needed to design solutions that target the needs of each client they serve?
2. Looking at the PI Character Assets graphic, how might HSC draw upon some of the other character assets in the PI framework to gain the practical wisdom they need to serve their clients effectively?
3. Is HSC’s work inherently “moral”? If so, why or why not?
4. Within schools, a student may do well academically and behaviorally and yet still struggle with contextual factors such as abuse, discrimination, or other social or physical challenges both inside and outside the school walls. Such students might not normally fit the parameters of a traditional IEP.
   a. How might your learning team work together to enact PI Practice C1 by identifying the unique cultural or contextual factors—whether those factors be inside or outside the school—that hold these students back from flourishing?
   b. How can your team employ the PI asset of collaboration to engage in systems thinking (PI Practice I1) to find individualized solutions for some of these students?
5. Create a list of individuals and organizations with whom you could begin to develop the collaborative relationships needed to provide uniquely tailored systemic solutions for your students.