Theories of Change in WP Research & Evaluation

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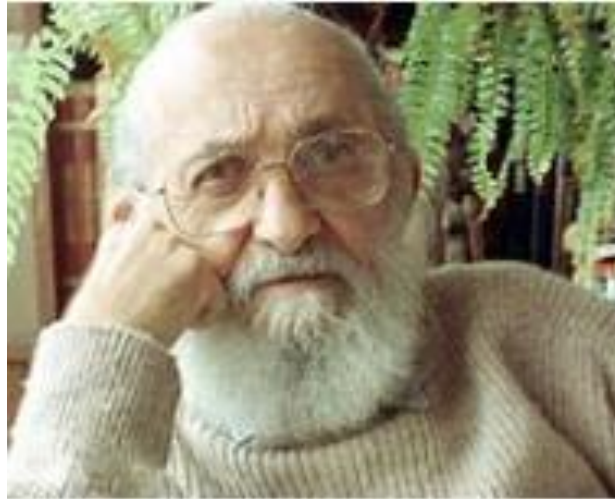
NERUPI Convenor, University of Bath

Social justice and theories of change

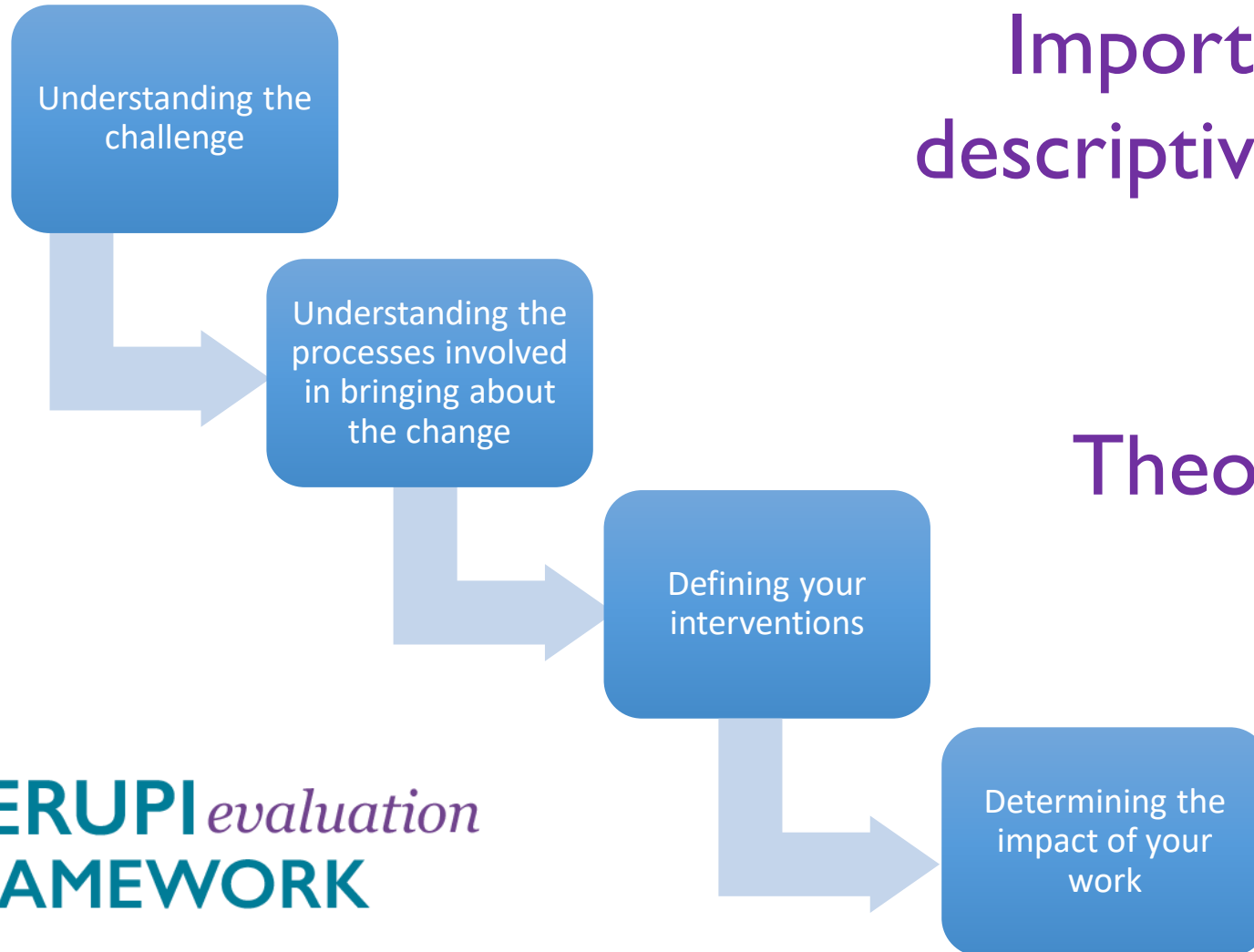reflection and action directed at the structures to be transformed

praxis

Paulo Freire 1968

- **Theory &** academic research – quantitative and qualitative
- **Practice**

Theories of change

Understanding the challenge

Understanding the processes involved in bringing about the change

Defining your interventions

Determining the impact of your work

Important to move beyond descriptive research to action

BUT

Theories of change often too simplistic

and linear

NERUPI *evaluation* **FRAMEWORK**

Accountability, context & impact

Picciotto warns against the 'lure of the medical model',

'Experimental black boxes are poorly suited to the evaluation of complicated or complex programmes in unstable environments' (Picciotto, 2012: 223)

a field called translational science has been invented to concentrate on bridging laboratory finding with clinical experience.' . Fendler (2016)

'RCTs often premised on students having a problem or 'symptoms' that require treatment ... these students are pathologised first by naming their problem (often expressed in terms that match the solutions at hand) and then by being treated with an intervention by some external agency or person. (Gale, 2017: 4)

Accountability, context & impact

How can we assess effectiveness of interventions?
'what works' is a matter of judgement rather than data, and that this judgement is imbued with moral and ethical concerns' (Morrison, 2001: 79).

Copestake argues for measurement based on the notion of 'reasonableness', involving a range of stakeholders
'This falls short of scientific certainty, but in complex situations it is often as much as we can hope for ...... to aim higher may be counterproductive in terms of cost, timeliness and policy relevance.' (Copestake, 2014: 417)

Decade-long debate within the Development Evaluation community
Reached an uneasy consensus that a mixed-methods approach was required. Picciotto's (2012: 215–16)

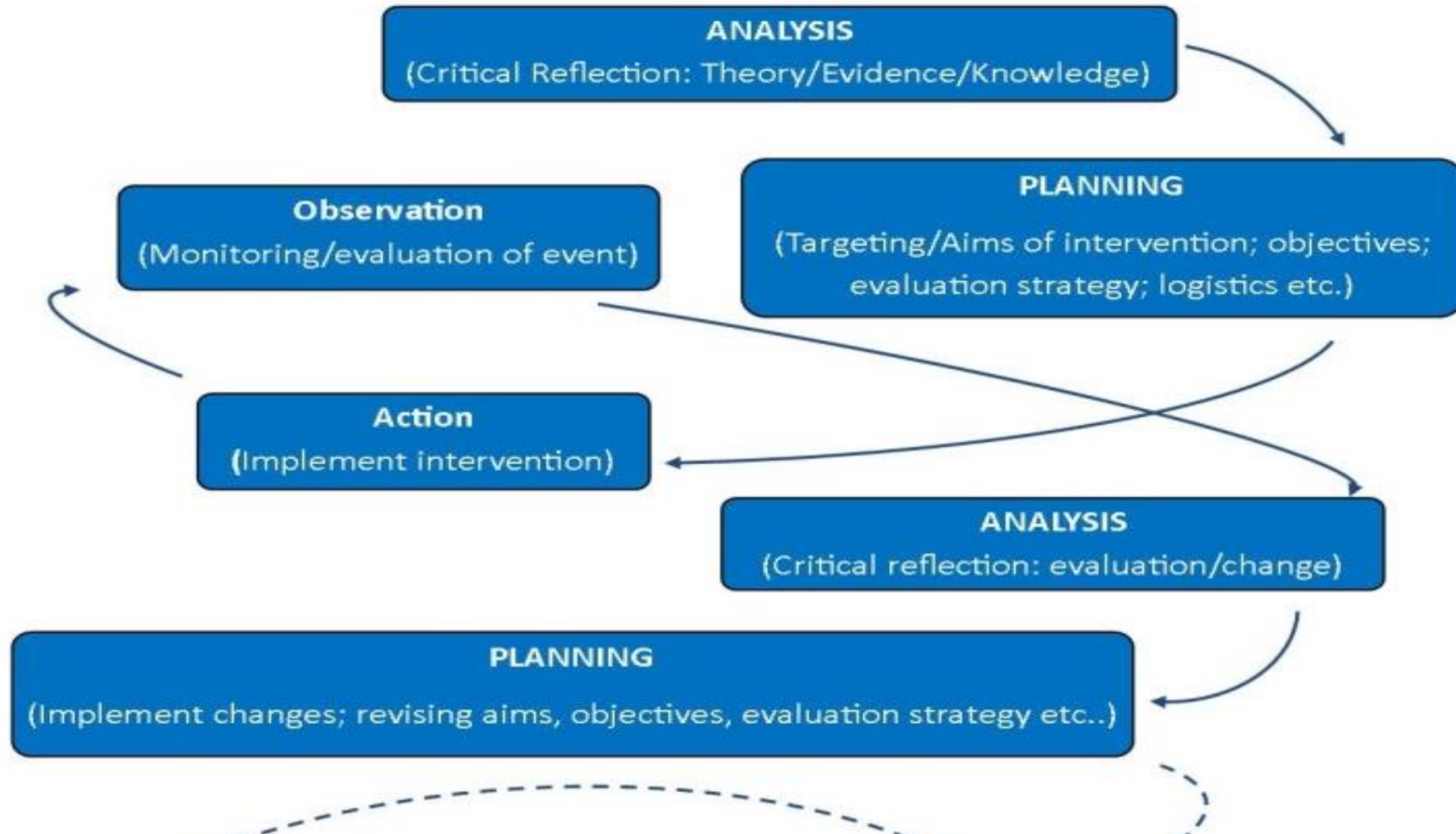NERUPI *evaluation* FRAMEWORK

Accountability, context & impact

Widening participation work is, or at least should be, based on the personal. …. in which young people are enabled to make choices and decisions, develop strategies and goals, plan for their futures, and are motivated, inspired and empowered. (Hayton and Stevenson 2018).
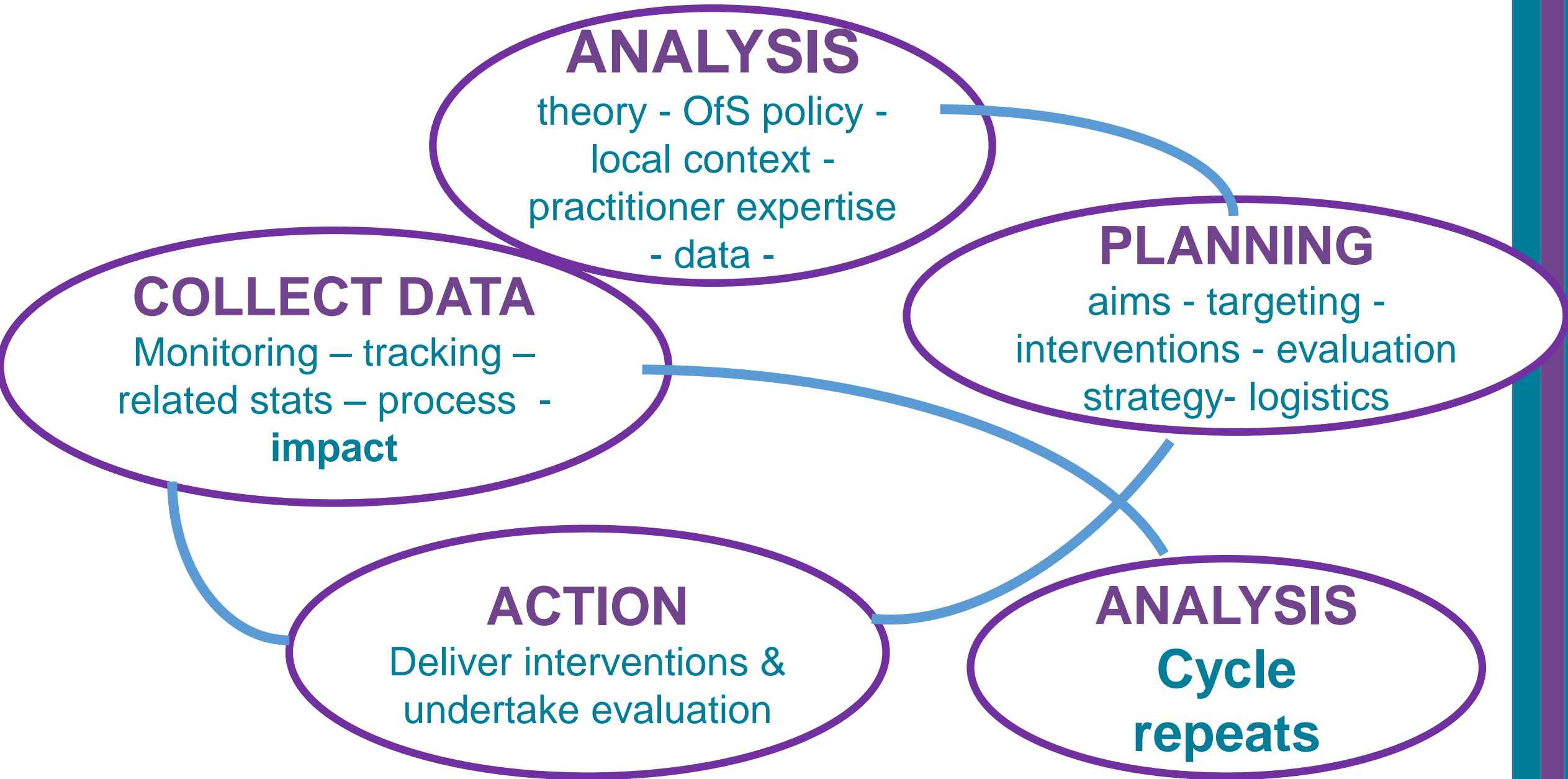
Nygaard and Belluigi (2011) argue that: *decontextualized approaches to evaluating learning and teaching are rooted in a static conception of learning .... more creative and flexible pedagogies are required and a contextualized model of evaluation that 'stress that relations between individual and fellow students, teachers, administration are determined by context*

Action research reflexive cycle

Action research reflective cycle for WP

ANALYSIS
theory - OfS policy -
local context -
practitioner expertise
- data -

PLANNING
aims - targeting -
interventions - evaluation
strategy- logistics

COLLECT DATA
Monitoring – tracking –
related stats – process -
impact

ACTION
Deliver interventions &
undertake evaluation

ANALYSIS
**Cycle
repeats**

Effective theory of change

- Aims for interventions informed by theory, research and practice
- Interventions reflect the aims
- Appropriate methods used to generate useful data
- Evidence to demonstrate impact and inform practice and theory

NERUPI *evaluation* FRAMEWORK

University of Sheffield Case Study

- The problems with our previous evaluation approach:
  - Lack of clarity about objectives to be measured
  - 'Last minute' evaluations
  - Badly 'calibrated' evaluation measures
    - Limited causal relationship with activity
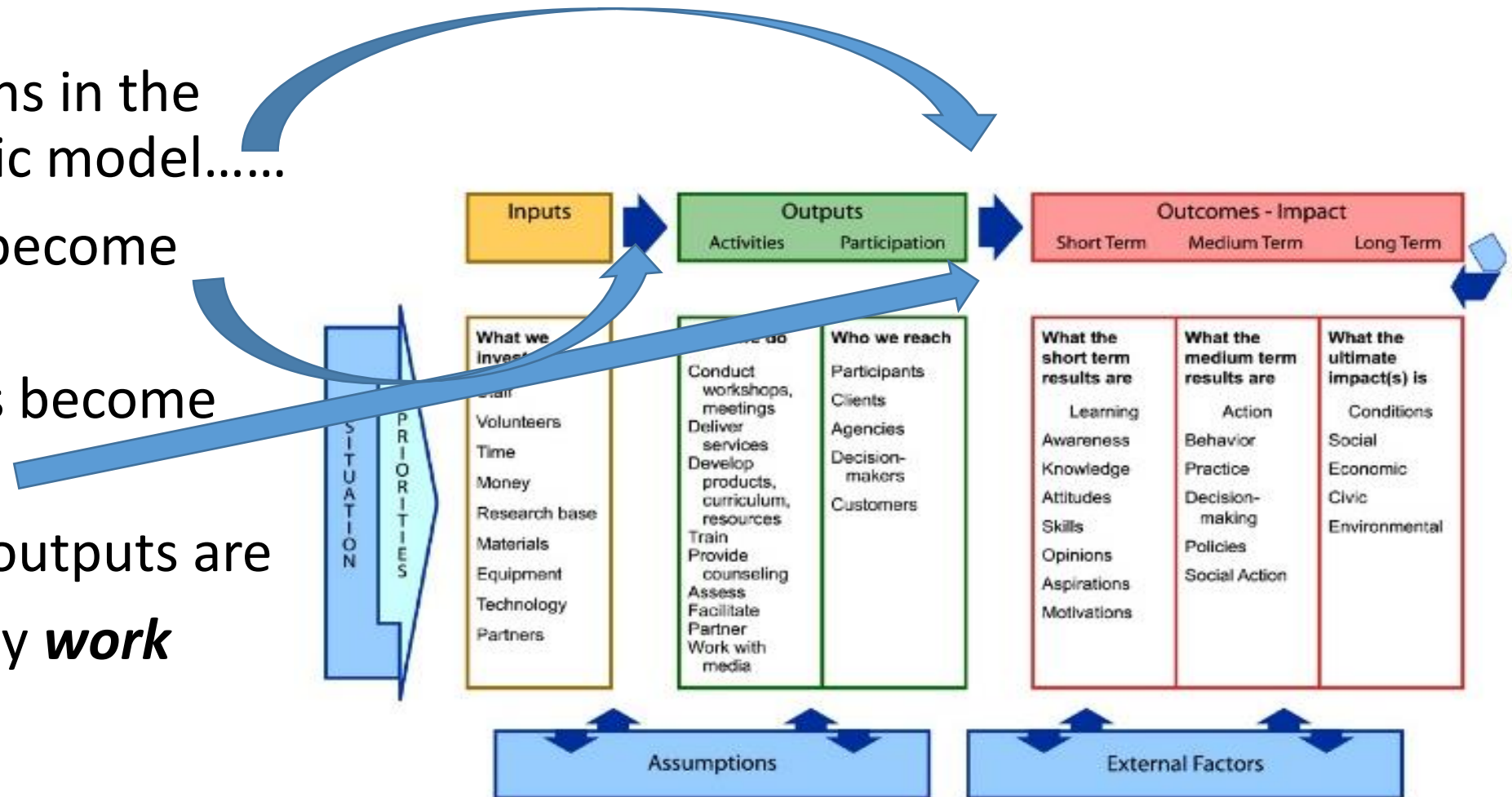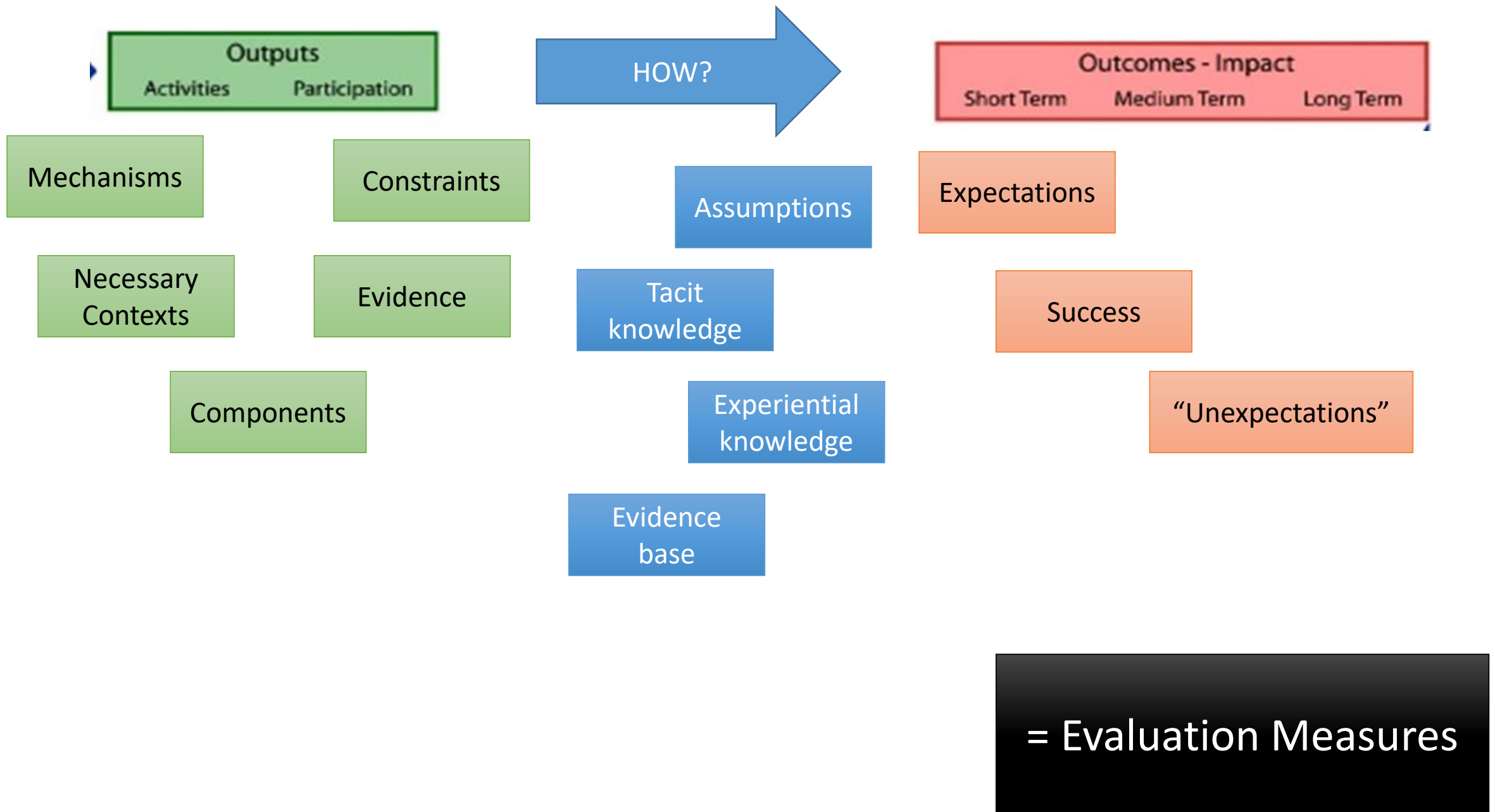 - Practitioners couldn't use evaluation outcomes
  - Uncertainty about 'claims'

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So….

- We developed a new way of designing activity evaluations
- Practitioners as co-creators *(praxis)*
- Capture tacit / experiential knowledge *(reflection)*
- Map implementation factors / constraints and limitation / assumptions / evidence
- *Pragmatic* approach / tightening focus

rethink

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Logic Models verses our 'Theory of Change'

- What happens in the gaps of a logic model……
- How inputs become outputs
- How outputs become outcomes
- What those outputs are
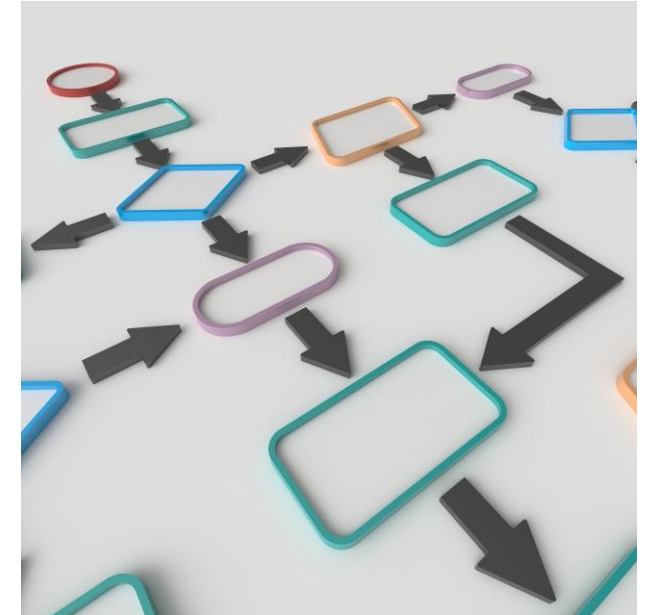- And how they ***work***

Structured Approach

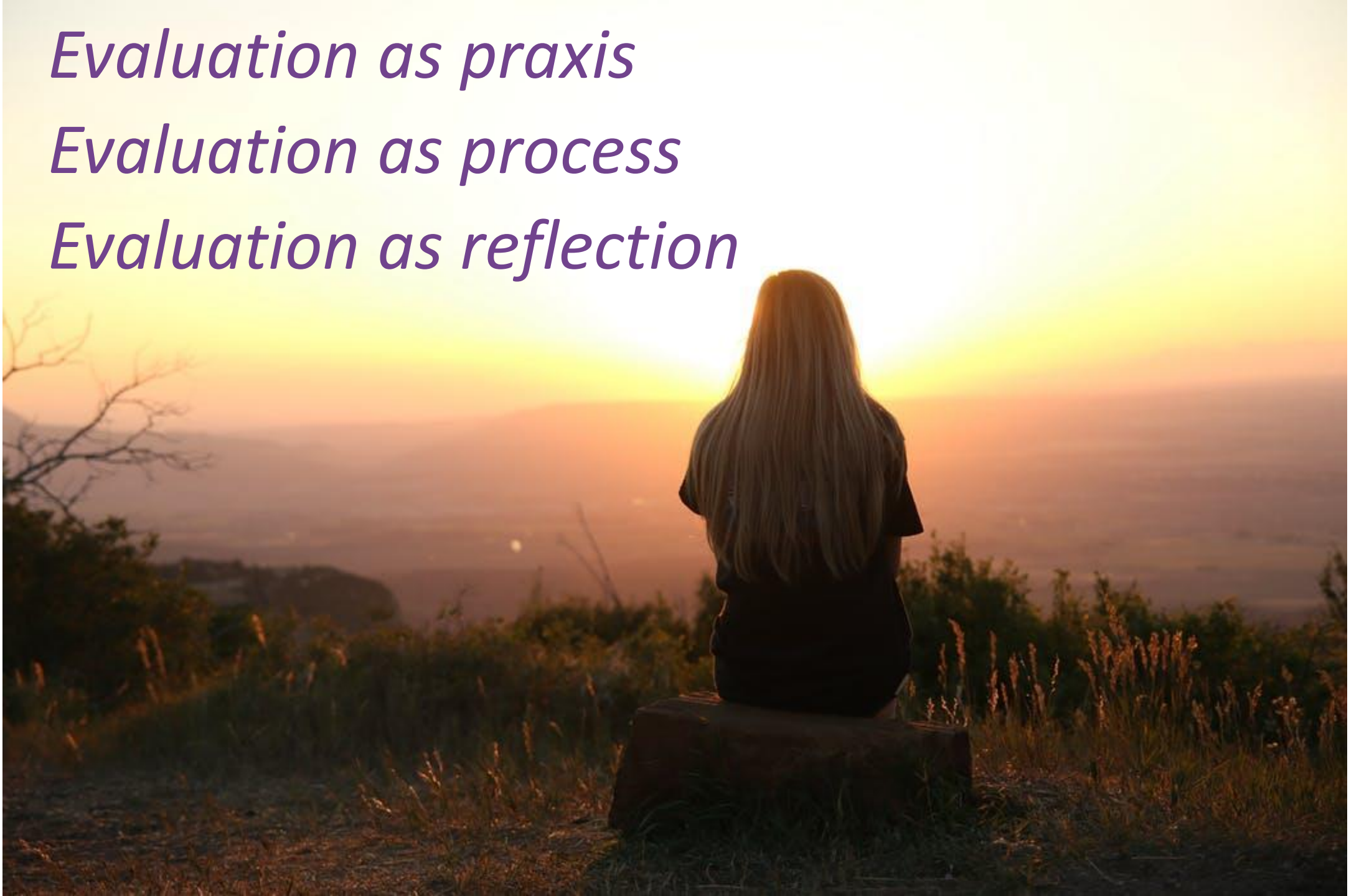Series of prompts to understand practitioner viewpoint

1. How do you see the problem you are trying to solve?
2. Who are you evaluating for? What do they expect?
3. Can you break the problem down into components?
4. How does this solution solve this problem?
5. In what contexts do you expect it to work / not work?
6. What else might give the same outcomes
7. What does success look like? (= Evaluation measures!)

Evaluation as praxis
Evaluation as process
Evaluation as reflection

First go at a theory of change workshop

- Series of prompts
  - Further questioning
- Evaluator as interrogator
- Explore assumptions and evidence base
- Identify 'unknowns' and decide what to do with them (further research?)
- Prioritise areas for evaluation

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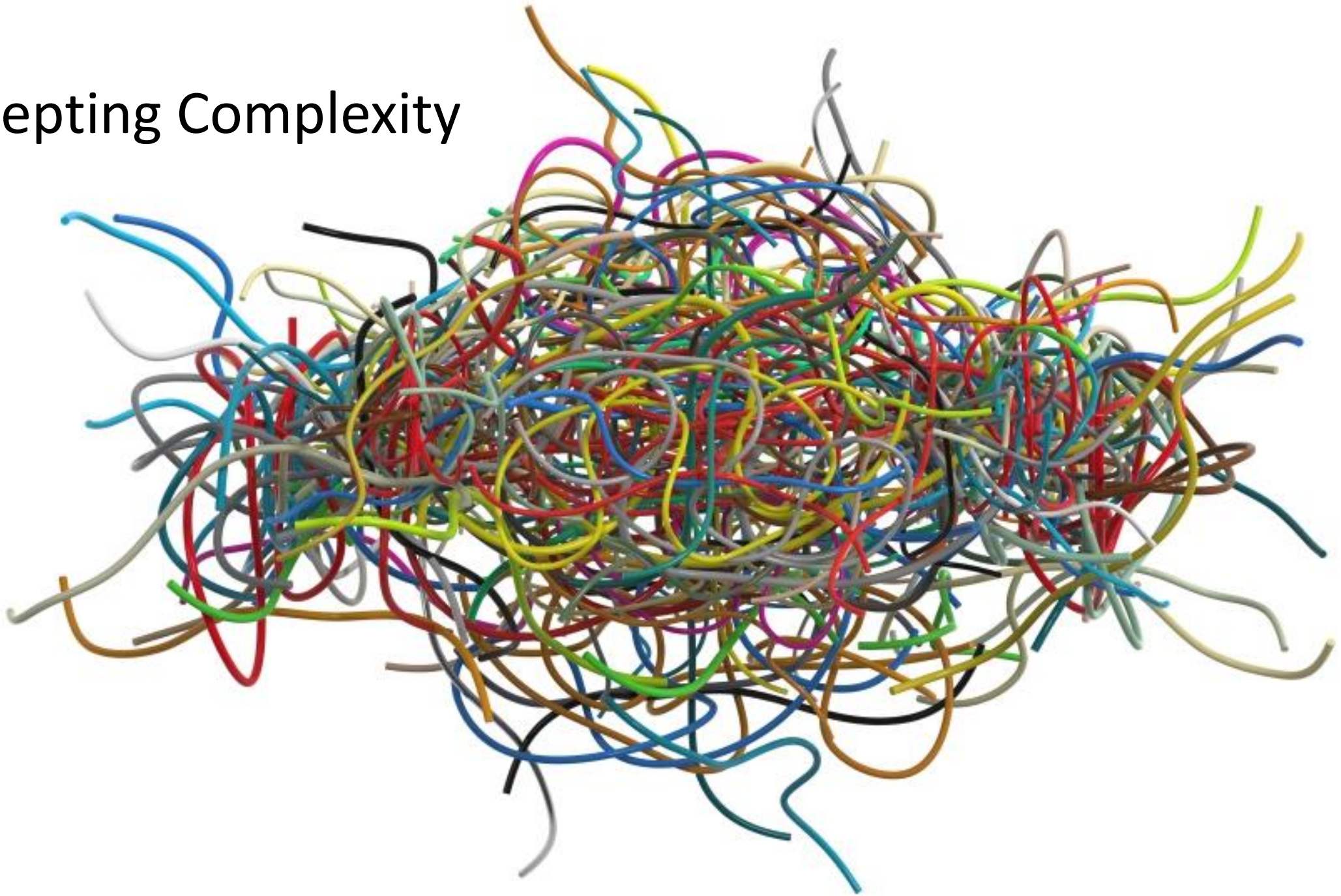AND EVALUATION UNIT

Learning from the initial workshops

- Outreach evaluations can be really complex!
  - Multiple objectives
  - Multiple theories and assumptions
- Lots of digressions
- And loose ends….
- Hard to formalise in a plan

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Accepting Complexity

So we developed a visual mapping process

Objectives:

- To help manage discussion

- To keep discussion on track

- To keep everyone in the loop

- To create a 'live' visual record of the discussion

- To capture and record key points

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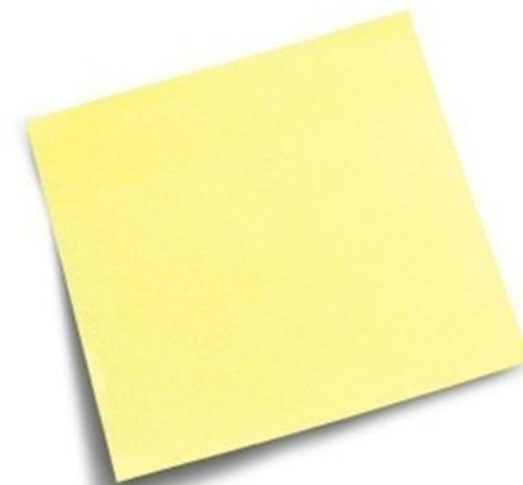WIDENING PARTICIPATION RESEARCH
AND EVALUATION UNIT

Steps 1-2

- Necessary tools:
- Post-it notes and flip chart paper of course....
- Set of thinking prompts:
  - Stage 1 – Problem Definition
    - What is the problem, why, who for, and what do solutions look like?
  - Stage 2 – Sub-problems
    - What are the parts of the problem, why is this a problem? Who for?
    - How do we know? (Evidence)
    - Pick sub-problems to focus on

Colour codes:

Green = evidence
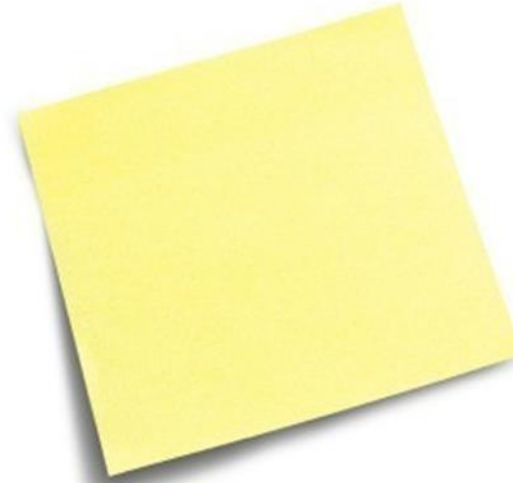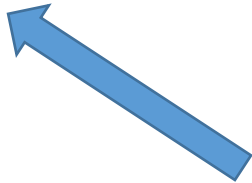
Pink = Assumptions

Steps 3-4

- Stage 3 - Thinking solutions
  - How do we solve this problem / what are we doing to solve it?
  - Why do you think this will work?
    - (Evidence / Assumptions)
    - Types of evidence / assumptions / tacit experiential knowledge
- Stage 4 – Questioning the solutions
  - What other factors impact on outcomes? What other contexts?
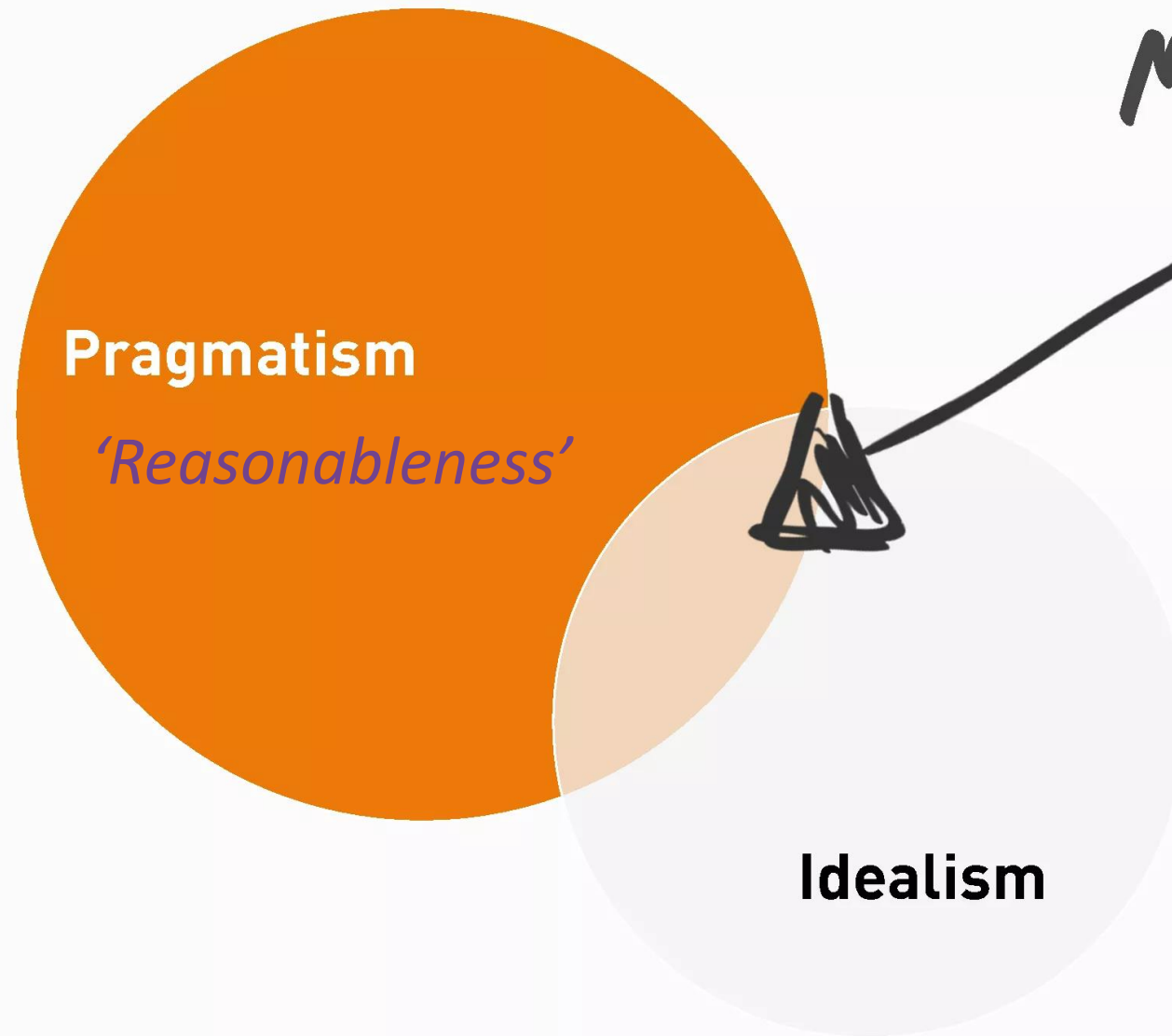 - What constraints or barriers are there?

Finally

- Stage 5 – Defining success
  - What does success look like?
  - How can you measure / prove successful outcomes?
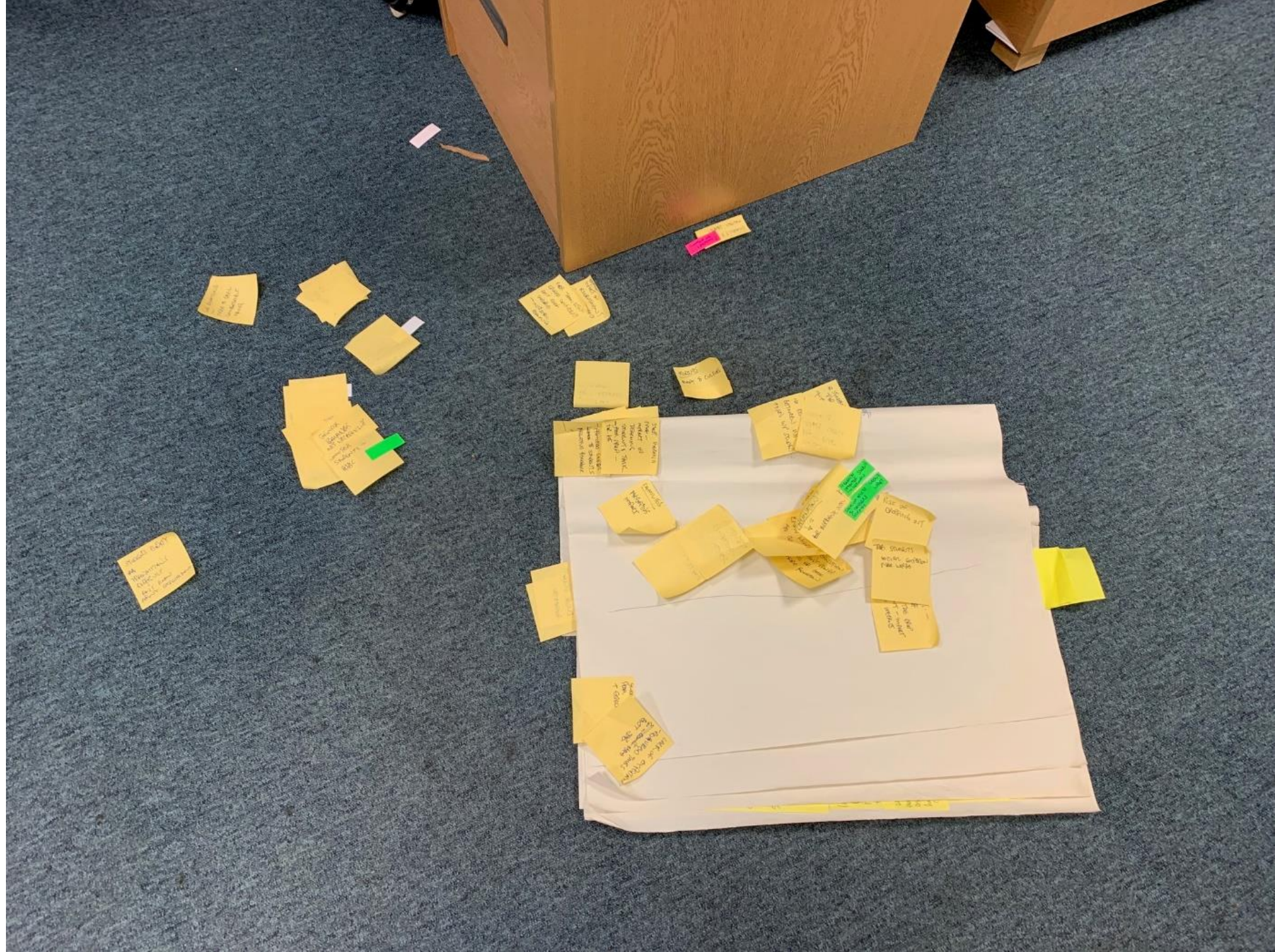
Evaluation measures

WHERE THE
MAGIC HAPPENS

Pragmatism

'Reasonableness'

Idealism

The outcome…

A Cautionary tale!

Note to self: Use tape or art fixative spray....

Next steps for UoS

- Different structural institutional levels requiring a TOC
  - Strategic – High level managers = spend and institutional strategy
  - Managerial – Institution / outreach managers = programme design / overall approach / translating spend into outcomes
  - Implementation – how the activity or programme delivers intended results
- Many different ways of approaching Theory of Change
  - Key value is that it buys space for *reflection* and thinking about practice / *praxis*
  - Alternative conceptions of TOC might offer other useful approaches
- Practicing what we preach
  - Theory of change / meta-evaluation *(Action Research Reflexive Cycle)*
- What about participants? *(Context)*