



Brotherhood of St. Laurence
Working for an Australia free of poverty

Let's make
change
that lasts

Advantaged Thinking Overview

A practice approach to working with people

Background & Overview

The Brotherhood of St. Laurence respectfully acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land and waterways on which our organisation operates. We pay our respects to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Elders past, present and emerging.

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About this Overview

The Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) has been innovating with Advantaged Thinking for over a decade in a range of settings in the youth sector, including education, employment, housing, settlement, leaving care, youth justice, disability and more. Our work spans service and program development and design, delivery of bespoke training packages, development of practice tools and resources and a guided self-assessment process for embedding an Advantaged Thinking approach across teams, divisions or organisations.

This document has been developed to provide an overview of the practice approach and theories that underpin this way of working. To date, the BSL has predominantly worked as an enabling organisation, supporting our partners and programs to adopt and embed an Advantaged Thinking approach to practice in their youth services, though we recognise Advantaged Thinking has applications in other areas of service provision across the life course.

The BSL is committed to continuing The Campaign of Advantaged Thinking through our communities of practice, training, self-assessment and resource development opportunities. Those interested in learning more about the Advantaged Thinking practice approach are encouraged to contact staff at the BSL.

Introduction to Advantaged Thinking

Over the past several years, the Brotherhood of St Laurence's (BSL) Youth Transitions team has been developing and refining a different approach to working with young people experiencing disadvantage across a range of settings, including homelessness, employment, education and out-of-home care. While our work has to date focused on using this approach with young people, Advantaged Thinking is applicable to all age groups who experience disadvantage and who engage with welfare service systems.

Drawn from Colin Falconer's (former Director of Innovation and Strategy at the Foyer Federation) pioneering work in the UK, Advantaged Thinking provides a framework for guiding the way we work with young people, focusing us on enabling them to build their capabilities for achieving a sustainable livelihood. In 2018, the BSL formed Advantaged Thinking Australia in partnership with the Foyer Foundation Australia, to formalise this work and drive fidelity to the approach.

Colin first conceived of the approach under the banner of 'Open Talent' – a concept used by the BSL in our Education First Youth Foyers as well – in response to the prevailing deficit-based ways of working with young people experiencing disadvantage in the UK. Colin, and his colleagues at the Foyer Foundation were frustrated that:

"...the narrative about young people was predominately negative. Too often, we knew more about what young people couldn't do than what they could. We talked about the need to help people cope, without always understanding or caring that people also need to thrive." (Colin Falconer)

The groundwork for Advantaged Thinking Australia began in June 2012 when Colin conducted workshops on the Advantaged Thinking approach with a small team from Hanover Welfare Services (now Launch Housing) and the BSL. An extraordinarily innovative and creative thinker, Colin shared his ideas in a spirit of great generosity, openness and dialogue. Colin's ideas have inspired the BSL to seed and develop a uniquely Australian version of Advantaged Thinking, and our partnership with him has continued through the process of trialling and refining the approach.

The BSL has long believed that collaboration between service providers built on trust and reciprocity has the potential to foster innovation in human service delivery. Collaboration creates opportunities for service providers to share ideas, and experiment with new approaches to service delivery while offsetting some of the unintended issues associated with the increased marketisation of human services. The ongoing development of the Advantaged Thinking approach has benefited greatly from the many and diverse community organisations that have partnered with the BSL and taken up this way of working as part of The Campaign for a better deal for young people in Australia.

Why a new approach?

Moving from deficit to Advantaged Thinking

“No athlete turns up to the Olympics and expects to win the marathon just because they’ve made sure they haven’t broken their legs. It’s as though we deny the opportunity for certain groups of young adults to live an existence beyond the deficits they pose. We invest more in controlling the problem, than we do in empowering the person. An investment in prevention is only half an investment if it is not matched by preparation for a positive life and the progression opportunities to achieve it.”¹

The welfare sector in Australia has, to date, typically focused on identifying the problems faced by people experiencing disadvantage. In response, governments and service providers have developed a suite of policies and practices to address or manage these problems. These responses have usually been delivered through siloed portfolio areas or government departments (e.g., homelessness, child protection, juvenile justice, mental health).

Government is gradually recognising some of the limitations inbuilt within the current suite of services on offer to people experiencing disadvantage.² Greater attention needs to be paid to moving people out of disadvantage by building on their strengths and capabilities. Currently, too many services for people experiencing disadvantage start with what the person is not, focusing on negative behaviour (offending, drug or alcohol misuse) or labelling them as a problem (e.g. care leaver, teenage parent).

The limitations of government-provided or funded services are often also mirrored in community sector services. Colin Falconer argues that:

“... even the charities set up to help those locked out of the mainstream often add to the problem: they battle against homelessness, they fight any number of deficit-based identities of young people – and by doing so, they keep the bar set low, fixing problems instead of solving social circumstances.”³

Clearly, how we view and value groups of people in the wider society influences the way we work with them, which in turn influences their ability to access opportunities and resources. For example, if we believe all young people have talents that can be developed – and we use language that embeds this and implement structures that encourage their talents – we could reasonably expect this will lead to service offerings that assist them to reach their potential. If we consider engagement in education, employment and independent housing as critical achievements for transitioning young people, then service offers designed to realise these outcomes are crucial. Changes to public perceptions about young people will follow.

Conversely, if we define young people as at risk, provide crisis management and report on crisis interventions, this provides wider society with a very different view of them.

Positive change is needed in the whole approach to working with people experiencing disadvantage, including a transformation of the language we use and the objectives that services seek to implement. Evidence from the UK and elsewhere has made a compelling case for the development of new forms of positive intervention, to equip more people with the capabilities required for them to contribute to, and benefit from, the wider society. To nurture people’s talents, we need to develop their skills, through access to resources and opportunities. This in turn, will assist them to establish a good enough sense of self, motivating them to achieve their goals.

Underpinning Theories

Colin Falconer's first foray into the development of Advantaged Thinking was informed by several social and community development approaches: strengths-based practice, the Asset-Based Community Development model (ABCD), and the Sustainable Livelihoods Approach (SLA). His work fused them together with philosophical notions of a 'good life' from the Ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle.

Building on Colin's innovative work and informed by the social policy work of the BSL's Research and Policy Centre, the BSL used the **capabilities approach**, **social capital** and **inclusive growth** theories to further develop and shape the concept of Advantaged Thinking in the Australian context.

These theories and models have each contributed to the development of the Advantaged Thinking approach. While they have their roots in diverse discourse and disciplines, they are united by a number of common themes, which have formed the basis of Advantaged Thinking, including:

- A concern with the notion of **'good life'**, a life people 'have reason to value' and importantly, with people's right to choose what that looks like – in short, the **right to agency**.
- A starting point of **strengths and assets**, rather than needs and problems – the inherent potential in people, and in communities, to achieve a life they have reason to value.
- A recognition of the **importance of structures** in shaping the choices that people can and do make – that people, no matter how strong, skilled or talented, are constrained and enabled by the systemic structures of the society around them. This means that to enable change, we need to attend not only to people's individual strengths and challenges, but to the opportunities, resources and networks that they have access to.
- A recognition that to provide these opportunities, resources and networks requires **multi-sectoral effort** – we need strong and diverse partnerships built on collaborative effort.
- And lastly, a **holistic view of people's lives** – that outcomes are not just about income or wealth, and that people cannot be artificially fragmented along siloed components of their lives (as government departments often are); we must see people as a whole.

Together, these theories and approaches have informed a way of working with service users, staff and the wider community in a manner that recognises their:

- vital role in social and economic life
- individual capacity
- access to opportunities and social networks that facilitate social and economic participation
- rights, responsibilities and commitments to themselves and the wider community
- sense of belonging
- personal agency or capacity to make decisions on their own and other's behalf.

Advantaged Thinking in Practice

As mentioned in the previous section, most service systems seeking to help people facing barriers have traditionally operated from a deficit approach, focusing on risks and needs and creating systems to address specifically these. This has often had the unintended consequence of further marginalising people by embedding them within systems separate from the mainstream.

While Advantaged Thinking acknowledges the complex challenges that people face, and the importance of addressing them, it attempts to redress the balance between meeting needs and nurturing the strengths and resources of people and communities. By taking a clear and consistent focus on assets we can better understand, grow, and promote the different skills, qualities, resources, opportunities and experiences that determine a thriving life.

As such, Advantaged Thinking represents a paradigm shift in the way we think about and respond to people experiencing disadvantage. It is a shift away from deficit, disadvantaged or problem-saturated thinking, towards positive thinking and acting. It is focused on identifying, developing and, most importantly, investing in the skills, capabilities and assets of these people so that they can establish sustainable lives. While disadvantaged thinking defines people by their problems and subsequently builds services based on managing them, Advantaged Thinking takes a different focus by acknowledging barriers but focusing on the person's innate skills and talents and investing in these talents appropriately.

Advantaged Thinking is not simply a strengths-based approach – although it draws from, and builds upon this widely used practice. Where strengths-based approaches usually focus on the individual and their strengths, Advantaged Thinking recognises the critical importance of the geographic, systemic and institutional settings within which they must make choices about their lives. It sees people as always situated within place, and the structures which either enable or curtail their ability to build a good life. In doing so, it recognises that any effort to create change for people must attend to both this individual and structural context, making positive investment and influencing change in both – one without the other cannot make lasting change for individuals or communities.

An Advantaged Thinking approach, then, sets as a primary goal a shift in how the government and community sectors invest in service participants, and how the broader community sees people facing barriers and their capacity to contribute meaningfully to a thriving society.

The 7 Tests

The 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking (based on Colin Falconer's principles of AT) support the development of a deeper understanding of the practice approach. They serve as a series of interconnected 'lenses' through which we can explore how and where Advantaged Thinking might be applied to common organisational policies, procedures and approaches.

The Tests lend themselves to reflection and improvement on:

- an organisational level (vision, values and mission, corporate supports such as HR and communications)
- a service/program level (service design & delivery, staff recruitment & team structure)
- an individual level (one-on-one work)

1. How you TALK about people

Test One looks at how an organisation or service uses language and imagery to identify and define the people it works with. It promotes talking about people in ways that respect their individual humanity and potential. This Test is relevant to external communications and fundraising, as well as the language and terminology used in everyday practice, including internal policies, procedures and information keeping.

2. How you UNDERSTAND people

Test Two looks at how an organisation or service understands people in terms of both their support needs and challenges as well as their abilities, potential and broader individuality. This Test draws attention to understanding people through holistic measures and asset-based insights and is relevant to impact measurement, evaluation, research, and service assessment processes.

3. How you WORK with people

Test Three promotes positive, person-centred working with both participants and staff. This Test asks us to consider how we can best work with people through enabling approaches that stimulate trust and belief, grow skills, resources and capabilities, and lead to sustainable outcomes. Services that can coach growth mind sets as well as support coping strategies, with staff experienced at managing their own performance, are better equipped to work with people's challenges and opportunities.

4. How you INVEST in people

Test Four looks at how an organisation invests in people in ways that enable individuals to progress through experiences of 'surviving and coping' towards more sustainable, thriving livelihoods. Investments include financial, human, physical, program and partner resources. This Test is relevant to risk and resource management, as well as approaches associated with providing people with a personalised 'deal' or 'opportunities' offer.

5. How you BELIEVE in people

Test Five looks at an organisation's aspirations for its people (both participants and staff). This includes unconditional regard for who people are, a strong belief in what people can achieve with the right opportunities and support, and the determination to trust in people's potential. This test is relevant to how an organisation expresses positive vision and values through its communications, HR, quality standards, management and support approaches.

6. How you INVOLVE people

Test Six looks at how an organisation or service involves people as active agents in their lives and service experience. This includes harnessing individual experiences and insights to shape approaches, collaborate on solutions, and ensure authenticity and accountability. This Test is relevant to service delivery approaches, as well as systems for review, quality, management and governance decisions.

7. How you CHALLENGE people

Test Seven looks at how an organisation challenges itself and others (in the service, local community, sector and society) to 'talk about', 'understand', 'work with', 'invest in', 'believe in' and 'involve' people in a positive asset-based way. It brings together all the Tests of Advantaged Thinking through a focus on shaping change at an individual, system and social level.

The 5 Key Practice Areas

The Advantaged Thinking approach recognises that with the right set of investments, service participants' talents can be scouted out and coached to build their potential. However, coaching alone is not sufficient, we also need to attend to the kinds of structures and supports around the service participant. Whether the service relates to education, employment, wellbeing or housing, these five areas need to be addressed in practice.

Advantaged Thinking operationalises this at a service level through 5 Key Practice Areas: **Places, People, Opportunities, The Deal** and **The Campaign**.

1. Places

An Advantaged Thinking service uses places and spaces to create and provide access to learning and working environments that inspire service participants, connect them to real world opportunities and enable their talents to thrive.

2. People

The service should connect participants to community members and networks to enable, coach and mentor them to participate in employment and education, to upskill and to help carve a pathway in education and employment and other goals.

3. Opportunities

An Advantaged Thinking service provides access to opportunities, resources and networks that can promote and develop participants' talents and enable them to realise their aspirations.

4. The Deal

The Deal is an ethos expressed throughout service delivery. Service participants are primarily responsible for their engagement in the service and by naming staff responsibilities, The Deal is designed to communicate that staff are also accountable for their work with participants.

5. The Campaign

The Campaign seeks to reform policy and to challenge needs-based deficit models. It advocates for change in the way we work with service participants and provides a framework to do this. The Campaign ultimately aims to reform the systems that service participants engage with, to enable them to participate fully in the social and economic life of their communities.



Want to learn more?

The Brotherhood of St Laurence can provide expert support to understand the purpose and qualities of the 5 Key Practice Areas, the 7 Tests of Advantaged Thinking and the key principles that underpin each area to help inform service or program design, and to embed this practice approach in service delivery. This support can be offered through the delivery of bespoke consultancy or training packages, or through guided implementation of the Advantaged Thinking Self-Assessment Framework.

The BSL is committed to continuing The Campaign of Advantaged Thinking through our communities of practice, training, self-assessment and resource development opportunities. Those interested in learning more about the Advantaged Thinking practice approach are encouraged to contact staff at the BSL by emailing Youth.Practice@bsl.org.au

Evaluations and Links

- [Brotherhood of St Laurence evaluations and information](#)
- [Aspirations and Opportunities leads to Employment Research Hand Out](#)
- [Better Futures Advantaged Thinking Practice Framework](#)
- [Finding that spark: what works to achieve effective employment services for young people? | Brotherhood of St. Laurence](#)
- [Improving employment outcomes for young people with disability: insights from the P2E program trial | Brotherhood of St. Laurence](#)
- [Starting a future that means something to you: outcomes from a longitudinal study of Education First Youth Foyers | Brotherhood of St. Laurence](#)
- [Certificate I in Developing Independence](#)
- [Developing Independence: evaluating an educational initiative for young people facing homelessness | Brotherhood of St. Laurence](#)
- [Paying attention to the future: piloting the Certificate 1 in Developing Independence in out-of-home care settings | Brotherhood of St. Laurence](#)
- [Preparing for the future: evaluation of the Career Launchpad program for school leavers with disabilities | Brotherhood of St. Laurence](#)
- [Push and pull: increasing student engagement in Developing Independence | Brotherhood of St. Laurence](#)
- [Foyer Federation](#)
- [Adventures in Advantaged Thinking | The Foyer Federation](#)

References

1. C. Falconer 2009, 'Open Talent: Investing in a Transformational Future for Britain's Young Adults', unpublished, pp. 6-7.
2. Department of Human Services (DHS) 2011, Human Services: The Case for Change, DHS, Victorian Government, Melbourne, p. 5.
3. Falconer 2009, op.cit.