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Booklet 1

Network leadership in action:

Getting started with Networked Collaborative Enquiry



*“When networks need to
know, the members are
prepared to routinely
investigate their work.”*

Earl & Katz, 2005

Networked Collaborative Enquiry

This publication, in NCSL's *Network leadership in action* series, is one of a set of three practical development tools designed to provide school and network leaders with all they need to get started with Networked Collaborative Enquiry (NCE). This booklet sets out the background and rationale to using NCE and outlines a number of different approaches to undertaking the process in schools and networks. The second and third accompanying booklets contain snapshots from the practice of networks engaged in collaborative enquiry, together with tools and templates for use in thinking about the stages of developing enquiry in your network and the strategies you might wish to employ to develop NCE further.

Using this development tool

The guidance notes, which follow, first set out some definitions and key characteristics that help to explain why collaborative enquiry and learning networks are so well suited (pages 2–3).

Following this, three different approaches to collaborative enquiry in learning networks are described (pages 4–9). The examples are real, although they represent composite accounts where the work of more than three networks is represented. These network narratives of NCE in action are designed to:

- **explore the range of network purposes and contexts to which collaborative enquiry lends itself** – where a series of reflective questions are used to help you to think about what each approach might offer you, your school or your network
- **highlight strengths and areas for development in relation to different approaches to collaborative enquiry** – where alternative scenarios are suggested to help you to plan for sustainability in your own context
- **signpost materials and useful resources that could help to address these issues** – where additional references and resources are indicated that might help you to explore an approach in more depth or detail

What is collaborative enquiry?

Collaborative enquiry is a particular example of school-based research. It involves individual practitioners in a school or group of schools choosing to come together to investigate and learn more about an aspect of their practice in order to enhance the learning of the children they teach, or to influence the development of their school or network as an educational community.

They do this by engaging with current theory and research and by gathering information about that aspect of their practice under investigation. Together they analyse and reflect on the information gathered and identify how practice needs to develop in the light of their investigations. On the basis of what they learn, they plan and implement change across a range of contexts and collect evidence about the effects of their changes which informs further reflection and development.

School-based collaborative enquiry has been described as being technically simple but socially complex. Whilst collaborative enquiry may be technically more straightforward than traditional research, it is not simplistic nor without its own rigour. Indeed, the very fact of collaborating with colleagues brings with it a pressure for quality processes and outcomes as part of peer accountability. It brings discipline to enquiry and builds ownership for its processes and outcomes.

Effectively, it is a group of peers facilitating learning for each other and being honest with each other about their own practice and beliefs. This requires a high level of interpersonal skill, an understanding of group processes and effective communication, as well as personal qualities including honesty, sensitivity, commitment and trust.

“Practitioners working together collaboratively is an essential process if practitioners are to make sense of their knowledge and understanding so that it can have an impact on classroom practice and therefore on the learning experiences of pupils.”

Desforges, 2002

By working in this way, enquiry participants create new knowledge and add to the knowledge base for a wider group of professionals. The sense that they are learning on behalf of others, for the benefit of children and their colleagues, is a powerful motivator. As educational practitioners they contribute to the progressively expanding knowledge base of the profession. This explicit commitment to publicising and sharing new knowledge is a key component of collaborative enquiry. It is important to note, however, that the sharing takes place not through a straightforward ‘transfer’ between classrooms, departments or schools, but by adaptation and redesign by colleagues in other contexts, usually achieved through another collaborative enquiry cycle. Collaborative enquiry is about transfer of best process rather than of best practice. It is a way of working rather than a prescribed set of activities.

Acknowledgements

With thanks to Julie Temperley for her contribution to this publication and to all of the networks who kindly contributed examples from their practice of Networked Collaborative Enquiry in action.

What is Networked Collaborative Enquiry?

What gives Networked Collaborative Enquiry its distinctive flavour is the explicit commitment of a group of practitioners, investigating together, who intend from the outset to involve a wider community within and across their schools. It is designed to contribute to the collective professional knowledge pool and to influence broadly, as well as specifically, the classrooms of the core participants and their colleagues. In environments in which change is happening fast – and that is certainly true of schools – it is a means by which a number of practitioners can learn on behalf of the wider school and educational community.

Network members seek out strategies for learning from, with and on behalf of each other in ways which extend their capacity beyond the resources of the group or the schools in which they are based. They find ways to turn that learning into evidence that will convince others to buy into the enquiry process and its outcomes. One way to think about this is the networked learning model, the three fields of knowledge:

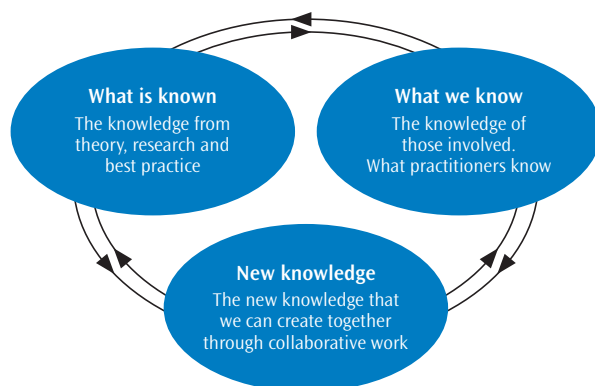


figure 1 Three fields of knowledge

This learning design describes the dynamic relationship between practitioner and public knowledge and the new and powerful knowledge created in collaboration with others. Collaborative enquiry generates knowledge that is based in evidence from research and from practice that is relatable and adaptable to context and values both individual contribution and team work. In other words, Networked Collaborative Enquiry is a capacity-building leadership strategy for developing and sustaining a learning network.

“Enquiry-based leadership...develops the capacity not only to cope with a rapidly moving knowledge base, but the capability to create, shape and move it forward, and in doing so develop the kind of transformative learning organisations and communities needed in the future.”

Carter & Ireson, 2003

Why do collaborative enquiry in networks?

In learning networks, practitioners consciously commit to working together to innovate, to experiment and to problem-solve on behalf of their colleagues. In order to achieve this they need a methodology – a way of working together – that is flexible and adaptable to purpose and to context, but that at the same time is sufficiently structured to survive the rigours of day-to-day life in schools such as unpredictable meeting patterns and changes in priorities, resource allocations and personnel. NCE has proved to be an effective means by which this might be achieved.

Enquiry is a fundamental tenet of learning networks (Earl & Katz, 2005). A key principle is enquiry-based practice – evidence and data-driven learning. In networks this involves developing collaborative enquiry approaches which generate network data intelligence and collective knowledge about professional practice and the leadership of learning. In networks engaged in the act of creating new knowledge together through collaborative work, network enquiry projects have been one of the most common ways of spreading innovative practice into more classrooms and schools (Church et al, 2006). Networked Collaborative Enquiry has proved to be a powerful tool to aid collaboration and change, and promote effective learning exchange across and between schools.

One thing to notice, however, about the way that collaborative enquiry is adapted in learning networks, is that very often it is ‘in disguise’. Learning networks call their approach to collaborative enquiry by different names – appreciative inquiry, action research, study groups, action learning sets, lead learner groups, lead developer groups. Sometimes network steering groups or headteachers’ forums function as a collaborative enquiry group on behalf of the network.

What these groups share is a set of values and beliefs about collaborative working and a commitment to a common learning design – these are key features of Networked Collaborative Enquiry.

“When networks need to know, the members are prepared to routinely investigate their work. Enquiry involves thinking about, reflecting on, and challenging individual and collective experiences in order to come to a deepened understanding of shared beliefs and practices.”

Earl & Katz, 2005a



To find out more about how collaborative enquiry is being used to positive effect in classrooms, schools and networks please see Street, H & Temperley, J, 2005, *Improving Schools through Collaborative Enquiry*, London, Continuum Press.

Approaches to Networked Collaborative Enquiry

Headteacher learning sets

In a network of nine primary schools, the energy behind convening the network and driving its work forward is the headteachers. They know each other well, share beliefs and values and trust each other's judgement. They are convinced that between them they have enough experience and insight to solve all and any problems in the network's schools if only they had enough quality time together to discuss issues in depth and come up with a solution.

The headteachers set up a learning set and meet monthly for a two-hour twilight session in a centrally located café. They agree a protocol that invites each participant to bring an issue to the table for discussion. An agenda is agreed at the beginning of the meeting and a maximum of two issues are addressed. There is a collective brain dump where everyone gets to contribute first thoughts and then a more considered discussion takes place. Usually there is an action that the headteacher whose issue is under discussion must undertake and report back at the next session.

The kinds of issues they address are varied and important. They include:

- pupil attendance and behaviour management
- performance management for staff
- recruiting and training classroom assistants
- parent consultation

After a strong start at the beginning of the school year, the headteachers start to miss sessions. By the end of spring term attendance is so poor that the few headteachers who are there undertake to call colleagues and try to find out what's going on. Following these conversations, they agree to a semi-formal review to air their issues and discover why their learning set is losing its momentum.



To find out more about how leaders of learning networks are using collaborative enquiry as a network leadership strategy please play the video clip 'Leading and co-ordinating enquiry' in the *Getting started with Networked Collaborative Enquiry* DVD (NCSL, 2006).

Pause for thought....?

What kind of enquiry focus for a learning set would bring the greatest added value to school or network activity in your situation?



To find out more about choosing a focus for Networked Collaborative Enquiry please play the video clip 'Focusing enquiry across a network' in the *Getting started with Networked Collaborative Enquiry* DVD (NCSL, 2006).

Alternative scenario...

As a result of their review, the heads agree some key changes to their model for their second year. They decide to:

- ✓ agree one big issue that is important to all the network schools and work on that
- ✓ invite a representative from the local university to be a facilitator and critical friend to the group
- ✓ form a study group in each of their own schools to take school-based work forward



Linked resources

To find out more about:

- **‘Facilitating collaborative enquiry in learning networks’** – read the first think piece in *What are we learning about...? Facilitation in school networks* or try using the development tool *Energising enquiry in school networks* (NCSL, 2006) available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla
- **leadership learning forums** – download the short article ‘Leadership learning forums: a new way of learning together’, *Nexus*, Winter, 2005 at www.ncsl.org.uk/nexus
- **developing protocols for collaborative working in networks** – read the think piece ‘Network facilitation; the power of protocols’ (Carter et al) in *What are we learning about...? Facilitation in school networks* (NCSL, 2006) available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla
- **involving practitioners in collaborative enquiry** – see the think pieces *Partnerships and participation in teacher research* by David Leat and *Perspectives on practitioner research* by Marion Dadds (NCSL, 2004), both available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc by clicking on ‘Network Research’.

Pause for thought....?

How might a learning set approach to collaborative enquiry be used in your context?

What are the ground rules, protocols and working processes you would want to put in place in establishing a learning set in your context?



“By making the familiar unfamiliar, collaborative enquiry can problematise tacit theories and taken-for-granted structures and relationships which shape the (common) experience of school.”

Alma Harris & Jane McGregor, 2005

Practitioners as action researchers

A network of seven successful secondary schools has a long-standing relationship with the town's university. The university suggests, and the network steering group agrees, that a co-ordinated group of action researchers working across all the schools could make a significant contribution to the next phase of development in the network.

Classroom-based research around Teaching Thinking – the pupil learning focus for the network – is identified as a good starting point to generate good evidence that other teachers will value and that will encourage others to participate in the network's activities.

Two experienced teachers from the humanities departments in each school are chosen by their headteachers to take part in a research methods course which is accredited by the university. They all agree a research question and choose to focus on the impact of Teaching Thinking on boys' motivation. The teachers have a hypothesis that the activities and structured discussions that form part of this kind of teaching will be beneficial for boys. They also believe that an explicit focus on boys' learning will serve to raise teachers' expectations and add to the boys' sense of achievement when they do well.

For two terms the teachers are funded to work in their pairs to try out some Thinking Skills lessons. They develop plans and resources together and observe each other teaching across a range of age groups and subject areas. The teachers are excited and invigorated by their research project. They feel that they are becoming better teachers and gather evidence of a positive effect on outcomes for the boys too. They look forward to doing more research together the following year.

In the summer term the teachers write up their research reports and submit them to the university. They also send copies to the network steering group which publishes the reports on the network's website. The pairs offer a workshop after school to colleagues in their own school. Take up is low, and the pairs are disappointed that they can't share their findings with colleagues, especially as the experiment has been so successful.

Pause for thought....?

What other strategies might have been used to recruit to this collaborative enquiry project?



To find out more about getting the most from school-university partnerships please play the video clip 'Working with HEIs as enquiry partners' in the *Getting started with Networked Collaborative Enquiry* DVD (NCSL, 2006).

Alternative scenario...

The steering group decides not to repeat the model in the following year. Instead, they decide to:

- ✓ set up an enquiry group in each school comprising teachers, support staff and pupils
- ✓ draw on the experience of the first researchers to train colleagues in relevant research methods
- ✓ ask for progress reports and share emergent learning widely throughout the project
- ✓ publish a leaflet for governors, parents and pupils based on the findings



Linked resources

To find out more about:

- **using a collaborative action research approach** – visit the Collaborative Action Research Network (CARN) website at www.did.stu.mmu.ac.uk or use the development tool ‘Two routes to an improvement solution’ in *What are we learning about...? ‘Making mathematics count’ in school networks* (NCSL, 2005), available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla
- **how the work of a small group of enquirers can inform the practice of a wider group of their colleagues** – read the think piece *Knowledge management and action research* by Mark Hadfield (NCSL, 2004), available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc by clicking on ‘Network Research’
- **capturing and sharing the processes and outcomes of enquiry** – use the development tools *Writing research and enquiry summaries* (NCSL & CUREE, 2004) and ‘Multiplying the learning through collaborative enquiry’ in *What are we learning about...? ‘Making mathematics count’ in school networks* (NCSL, 2005), both available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc by clicking on ‘Network Research’ and ‘What are we learning about...?’ respectively

Pause for thought....?

In what ways might effective enquiry partnerships be built with your local HEI?

What are the lessons from this collaborative action research project that could be applied in your context?



“All well-founded curriculum research and development, whether the work of an individual teacher, of a school or of a group..., is based on the study of classrooms. It thus rests on the work of teachers. It is not enough that teachers’ work should be studied: they need to study it themselves.”

Laurence Stenhouse, 1974

Lead learners as enquirers

After two years of working hard to build a network from scratch, the headteachers of six small primary schools are looking for new ways of moving ideas and practice around between their schools. They decide to identify six teachers, one in each school, and give them the job of identifying, capturing and sharing best practice.

The lead learners are given some time and administrative support to do this. They decide to start off by conducting a survey and they issue a questionnaire to all staff and pupils. There is a big response and the lead learners follow up on a number of issues. They meet together and spend time visiting each others' schools. They are also able to observe some of their colleagues in action in their classrooms.

After one term of this kind of activity, the lead learners publish a directory of good practice. They take care to ensure that all the schools are well represented and value a range of approaches. The directory is well received by their colleagues. Through this process, they are also able to identify areas for development that will benefit all the schools.

The lead learners set up a series of INSET sessions which address these areas for development. They draw on all their knowledge and skills and offer some excellent interactive sessions. Participants enjoy the sessions and offer good feedback. The headteachers are pleased with the programme and repeat it in the following year. The lead learners are glad to have their good work valued.

As it was so successful the year before, the lead learners repeat their process. They discover one or two more examples of really good practice, which they use to update the directory. However, they are surprised to discover that the same areas for development exist in the same places. No improvement in practice is evident despite the CPD provision.

When the second questionnaire attracts a poor response rate, they are disappointed to learn from feedback that neither their colleagues nor the pupils have any confidence that their comments were heard and acted upon in the previous year.

Pause for thought....?

What could the lead learners have done differently in this situation to make everyone feel more involved in this collaborative enquiry project?

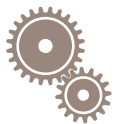


To find out more about getting others involved in networked collaborative enquiry please play the video clip 'Engaging in enquiry – involving others' in the *Getting started with Networked Collaborative Enquiry* DVD (NCSL, 2006).

Alternative scenario...

The lead learners turn to their headteachers for guidance and together they decide to:

- ✓ revise their approach to CPD in the network to include research lesson study and coaching
- ✓ set up a pupil enquiry group in each school to work on behalf of a network-wide pupil council
- ✓ find specialist support in the form of resources and people for the persistent areas for development
- ✓ talk to the local authority about inviting some other schools to join the network



Linked resources

To find out more about:

- **the experience of network lead learners in developing a collaborative enquiry approach** – download the short articles ‘Building leadership through enquiry’, by Jean Hart from Hartlepool NLC, and ‘Ice-cream innovation! Leading from the inside out’, by Chris Bagnall and colleagues from Stockport NLC, both in *Nexus*, Winter 2005, available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/nexus
- **using collaborative enquiry to improve teaching, learning and leadership** – use the development tools *Getting started with Networked Research Lesson Study* (NCSL, 2005) and *Getting started with Networked Learning Study-visits* (NCSL, 2006), both available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc by clicking on ‘Network leadership in action’, or download the short article ‘A key ingredient: dialogic learning’ (Franey et al) in *Nexus*, Summer 2004, available at www.ncsl.org.uk/nexus
- **involving pupils in collaborative enquiry** – read the think piece *Students as researchers* by Jane McGregor (NCSL, 2004), available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc by clicking on ‘Network Research’, or download the short article ‘Developing enquiry-based leadership and learning: the power of pupil involvement’, in *Nexus*, Winter 2005, available online at www.ncsl.org.uk/nexus

Pause for thought....?

Who are the lead learners in your context and how could they become involved in collaborative enquiry?

How might a sustainable model of collaborative enquiry be developed for the long-term in your context?



“For some, research provides the opportunity to scrutinise their own practice, to provide a basis for constant improvement and to ensure that their teaching really is making a difference. For others, researching their own classroom enables them to see things from their students’ perspective.”

Non Worrall, 2004

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Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other learning with each other learning on behalf of each other