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Booklet 1

Network leadership in action:
**Getting started with
Networked Learning
Study-visits**



*“The voyage of discovery
lies not in finding new
landscapes, but in
having new eyes.”*

Marcel Proust

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Networked Learning Study-visits

This publication in NCSL's *Network leadership in action* series is one of a set of two practical development tools designed to provide school and network leaders with all they need to get started with Networked Learning Study-visits (NLSv). This booklet sets out the background and rationale to using NLSv and outlines six 'stepping stones' of guidance to undertaking the process in schools and networks. The second accompanying booklet contains tools and templates for use in planning, carrying out and reflecting upon the outcomes of your study-visit.

What is a Networked Learning Study-visit?

Those who have experienced NCSL's leadership learning provision through, for example, the New Visions and Collaborative Leadership Learning programmes will already be broadly familiar with the developing concept of the study-visit. It is just one of a broad range of collaborative learning activities – learning conversations, intervisitations, international placements for headteachers and the creation of artefacts for learning – which build upon aspects of existing practice in many schools to offer new ways of working together and new access to the flow of innovative ideas in education.

“Networked Learning Study-visits are a series of organised and highly structured collaborative enquiry steps into the classrooms of a school by colleagues from that and other network schools, in order to identify evidence of progress and areas for development.”

NCSL, 2006

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).

NCSL's Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme is underpinned by a principled commitment to learning from, with and on behalf of others. School-to-school learning has therefore, been a key feature of network activity, where collaborative enquiry has proved to be a powerful tool to aid collaboration and change, and promote effective learning exchange across and between schools.

When the first NLCs embarked on their collaborations, their immediate challenge was to find a means of engaging the participation of all their partner schools. Commitment to collaborative enquiry was an early solution.

“Collaborative 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, 2005

Of the many approaches to collaborative enquiry taken up by network practitioners and school leaders within the NLC programme, the use of Networked Learning Study-visits has proved to be one of the most popular strategies for promoting effective school-to-school learning.

Why do study-visits in networks?

In learning networks, study-visits are a particularly effective form of enquiry because they meet networks' needs while simultaneously modelling the values of collaboration. Each NLSv is a living example of the values that underpin the creation of learning networks. Visits may be constructed differently but the processes necessary to ensure that they meet their objectives exhibit the same key features identified by Earl & Katz (2005) in posing the question – What makes a network a learning network?

■ Purpose and focus

This is what shapes the study-visit and determines its composition and content. Each visit must be designed to contribute to agreed network objectives and have a clear learning focus (see Step 1).

■ Relationships

Success depends on creating and securing personal and professional working relationships which value opportunities for new professional dialogue. Getting to know each other, seeing each other at work in the classroom and creating the space for shared reflection are important trust-building activities within the study-visit process (see Step 2).

■ Collaboration

NLSv rely upon voluntary involvement and shared planning. The school-to-school teamwork involved is in itself a collaborative exercise. It also has the advantage of taking the network to the classroom – the heart and soul of a learning network – in a way which facilitates collaborative learning and knowledge exchange (see Step 3).

■ **Enquiry**

NLSv have many of the characteristics of other classroom-based enquiry methods, from the articulation of key enquiry questions, through to planning classroom observation activity and data collection, to the sharing of findings (see Step 4).

■ **Leadership**

Study-visits in learning networks demand a different approach to leadership, a step away from traditional authority-based models. Visits have to be negotiated in ways which both support and sustain the work of the network and that of participants at a variety of levels. They encourage existing and future leaders to conceptualise their own practice in new and different ways (see Step 2).

■ **Accountability**

Each visit requires the investment of time and personnel. It must offer tangible outcomes and benefits to both visitors and hosts (see Step 5) and to the network as a whole. Being jointly accountable for capturing the outcomes of the study-visit and making explicit the ways in which these will inform future development is of equal importance to all those involved in the process (see Step 6).

■ **Capacity-building and support**

As well as providing evidence that can contribute to the network's learning focus, study-visits demand reflexivity about processes and constructively supportive approaches to the observation of practice. Involvement in the process can also help to build schools' capacity for change and development (see Step 5).

Using this development tool

The guidance notes which follow move beyond the concept of structured group visits to partner schools, to describe how school learning networks have adapted and grown this idea to suit their specific needs through the use of the NLSv process.

On the following pages we outline six stepping stones to NLSv. For each step you will find:

- a brief introduction outlining each step in the process
- a network narrative illustrating how participants have used NLSv, some of the unexpected difficulties they faced and how these were overcome
- a set of reflective questions to help you decide how to use NLSv to promote enquiry in your school or network context

Stepping stones to Networked Learning Study-visits: overview of the process



Stepping stones to Networked Learning Study-visits



Step 1 Agreeing a focus

The best foundation for identifying your focus is to think about how networked processes can create school improvement in which pupil and adult learning complement each other.

A disciplined approach to each visit is essential. It is important to agree specific goals in advance and to ensure that the content of each visit is designed to support the achievement of these goals. What they are will depend on the maturity of the network and its shared history. The way can be smoothed if both hosts and visitors have a clear idea of what they have to gain.

At first you will want to establish good relationships and identify areas of shared interest for future enquiry. In a follow-up visit the focus may be determined by previous discussion.

Breaking the ice...

"Ours is a new network. Frankly we struggled to build relationships and trust though we knew just how important these would be to our success. We were lucky enough to meet another learning network that was more advanced than us. They'd been through it all already and were beginning to see the benefits of perseverance. Their enthusiasm convinced us to go ahead with Networked Learning Study-visits.

Our circumstances within the network were very different. We hadn't fully decided on our joint priorities because we were still getting to know each other's schools. The network was something we'd planned and decided on mostly at deputy head level and about half the schools were reluctant to take part in visits.

So far, four schools have done it and it's really helped to break down the barriers between us. Now when we meet at the Deputy Heads' Forum there's an instant rapport. We don't hang back and make polite noises. We know what's going on in each other's schools and we're straight in with *"What did you decide to do about...? How did... work out?"*

We learned from the other network that you shouldn't be too ambitious on a first visit. We decided on one or two learning points and that's what we concentrated on. But we got a lot more out of it in terms of breaking down barriers. Next time round we're going to tackle some of our really big issues."


Pause for thought....?

What are our learning priorities?



How can we focus the visit so that it helps us with adult and leadership learning priorities in network schools?

What is happening in my school that can inform network thinking about our collective priorities?



Step 2 Establishing a team

At the same time as you are agreeing on your shared focus you will probably be thinking about key individuals who perform a variety of roles within the network. You will want to be sure that you know who is best placed to join the study-visit team.

It is important to be flexible in deciding who should participate in a visit either as visitor or as classroom host. Visits are often undertaken in peer groups – deputy or departmental heads or subject leaders, but that doesn't have to be the case. One of the biggest challenges of learning networks is how to ensure vertical as well as horizontal participation. It is easy to see that the support of school leaders is necessary in securing network objectives, but there is a lot to be gained from getting the reactions of colleagues at different levels and from students. Colleagues in all the schools need to see themselves as equal partners in a shared venture.

You need to think about the best match between people and objectives for each visit.

A toe in the water...

"At first the visits grew out of the discussions we had at the deputies' forum. Initially they were so successful that we were keen to steam ahead with more of the same. But then we began to get some quite anxious enquiries from heads and we realised we'd been too wrapped up in the visits as something that belonged to us. We'd forgotten to keep them informed about what we were doing and why.

At the same time we'd generated a lot of interest among the classroom teachers, so when I told a colleague I wanted to speak to her about the next visit she got all fired-up. She thought I was inviting her to join the visit group. When she realised I wanted the next event to include a visit to her classroom she was really disappointed. I hadn't appreciated what a stir we'd created. It made me think more about how we shouldn't be exclusive and how we'd got to open the whole thing up to all our colleagues."


Pause for thought....?

How will we ensure that everyone in the network knows why this activity is happening?



In order to further our collective goals who would be the best people to take part?

Who could learn most about their own leadership potential if they take part?



Step 3 Planning and preparation

The enquiry team and host schools need to be fully engaged with the learning focus, principles and behavioural norms agreed by the enquiry team and set these out in a set of study-visit protocols.

Each individual visit requires thought and planning. Visits should aim to contribute to overall learning network objectives as outlined in Step 1. It is important to establish a set of protocols that help you to meet all your objectives, while respecting the work and working environment of the colleagues who've been generous enough to act as hosts.

Each member of the team must have absolute clarity about the protocols involved. For more information on developing protocols for collaborative working – see *Network facilitation: the power of protocols* (Carter et al, 2006).

So many steps taken, many still to go...

"It's all a lot more time-consuming than we'd imagined. It's a delicate negotiation to go *en masse* into someone else's school. There are all sorts of sensitivities on both sides that we hadn't anticipated.

For example – our school burned down a couple of years ago. For a long time we were teaching in portacabins and trouble-shooting the problems as they arose. But our visitors came and saw us in a brand new school and that was all they could think about – how they couldn't do what we were doing, because they didn't have the same facilities. We were taken aback. We wanted them to see the good teaching not the newly painted classrooms. We also wanted them to use all that they knew to tell us about things we could do better, give us ideas that would be a step up for us. It seemed to us that they didn't distinguish between the new buildings they saw and the good practice, as if one produced the other. They were depressed at the thought of going back to work in their own physical environment.

We realised we hadn't been specific enough about what they were supposed to be looking for or about how we wanted them to help us get an objective view of our strengths and weaknesses. We'd let them get distracted by the superficial. We should have been much more careful about briefing them and establishing clear, reciprocal, expectations for the visit. That's a lesson for us to take into the future."


Pause for thought....?

How will the team be supported in preparing for its visit and what are the protocols we need to agree?



How will we make sure the visit is a real learning experience for everyone involved?

At what stage in the detailed planning should we involve the classroom teachers we hope to visit?



Step 4 Visiting the classroom

You can't get a truly comprehensive picture of what a school does in a single visit. It's really a snapshot of classroom practice. A tried and tested method is to spend no more than 15 minutes in each of the classrooms visited and gather evidence from several different sources. That could mean talking with students, analysing their work, observing the teachers in action and discussing the work with them afterwards.

Study-visits are where the learning network becomes a visible, tangible reality in the classroom. To the unfamiliar eye, it can look like any one of the many visits and inspections schools have become accustomed to, but it is very different. It is focused on shared purposes and has learning as its objective. While visitors may be enthusiastic about a particular activity or learning objective, it is important to think about your presence in the classroom and the approach you intend to take.

You can utilise any number of agreed recording methods to jot down your observations – see Booklet 2 *Networked Learning Study-visits tools and templates* for some suggestions.

In feet first...

"We took a lot of trouble to prepare for our first visit. We gave everyone questionnaires and comment sheets so they could make notes about what they saw. But in the discussion afterwards, we realised that we hadn't kept the class teacher fully informed and she'd been confronted with what looked like a set of Ofsted inspectors making notes and judgements about her teaching and then going off to talk about it to her head and deputy head. We realised what pressure we'd put on her by not explaining ourselves. We should have said upfront that we were looking for things that could be helpful to other schools, not carrying out another inspection. We've decided to offer full feedback to any teacher who volunteers to be observed – we know now that some have been put off because they feel so nervous about the whole thing. They need to know that we want to make their good practice work for us and our students too.

And another thing – we realised afterwards that we'd been so focused on the buildings, the displays, our notes and our conversations that we forgot about the most important factor of all – the students. If we really wanted to get a feel for those lessons we should have looked at their work as well as the teachers'. And we should have asked them what they thought. We all know that's the best indicator of what's happening and what works, but we'd spent so much time planning what the adults would do, we forgot the people it's all really for."


Pause for thought....?

How will we make sure our visit isn't disruptive or threatening?



What are the key questions and observations that can inform our thinking on the focus for this visit?

What mustn't we miss?



Step 5 Following-up

Immediately after each classroom visit, take time to share and discuss the evidence you have gathered in the context of the focus you identified in Step 1. The discussion should be based on thought-provoking questions rather than definitive judgements.

It is important to share the knowledge gained from NLSv with hosts and other partners as soon as possible. This can be done straight away in post-observation feedback and, in the longer term, through wider group discussions. Your feedback should be supportive and constructive.

One of the reasons for undertaking study-visits is to identify areas of challenge – aspects of the school's work where your own experience can offer a fresh perspective. During your first study-visit you might decide to give the idea of challenge a low priority – it might not sit well with the need to build strong and supportive relationships from scratch. However, challenge is a critical part of the support that learning networks can provide in the longer term. Participants need to know that suggestions for change will come in due course and will be helpful not destructive.

Catching the current...

"When I visit another school I make a point of offering feedback to the teachers I see. I like to ask a few searching questions about the things I'm not so sure of. I want to give them something to think about without being destructive. It's a two-way thing – I shouldn't be the only one who takes away a stock of new ideas.

Sometimes the feedback is around quite small stuff but you still have to be careful. We didn't have a very close relationship with one of the schools we visited so we were on our best behaviour. But one thing we all noticed was that the library seemed an unfriendly place to be, especially for children. It was very formal, quite intimidating, with high bookshelves and a clinical feel. It didn't look well-used. We all said so on our report forms. It turned out the head had designed it himself and it was his pride and joy. It was hard for him to accept what we said, but having four people from different schools say the same thing independently was pretty conclusive. I think that library will look different next time we go there."

Pause for thought....?

What stage have we reached in our learning network? Do we have a strong enough relationship with our partner schools to tackle a more challenging approach to what we see?



How will we make sure that we celebrate the successes we witness, as well as offering challenge?

How will we manage the feedback to the teachers we visit, the schools and the network?



Step 6 Looking forward

When the study-visit is over, everyone who has taken part should gather to review the evidence and think about the questions that surfaced at Step 5. This will suggest ways in which the visit can inform changes to teaching and learning and to the continuing professional development (CPD) of participants.

An NLSv is one leg of a voyage of professional exploration. Individual events need to be considered as part of a long-term strategy. The enquiry and capacity-building aspects of study-visits contribute to collaborative, sustained CPD, which we know is more effective and likely to have more impact on pupil learning than one-off events or individual activity (Cordingley & Temperley, 2006).

Successful study-visits depend on an investment of time and human resources. Like any other significant learning event, outcomes have to be analysed and evaluated so they can be incorporated into practical benefits for all the network schools. This is done most effectively through inclusion in individual school development processes or improvement plans and through establishing an effective system for reporting back.

The ripple effect...

"After each visit we give ourselves a month to produce some written feedback on an evaluation form – so it's all open and above board and everybody can see what we've done.

Now we need to follow up and check that the learning points we identified have made a difference. Our first visit was really diagnostic. I've produced a report for all the network schools so everyone can see what we did and hear about the good ideas we took away with us. The report was a joint effort really and obviously we discussed it with the head of the host school first. I've presented it at staff meetings and given a talk to governors so they can see the value of us taking the time out of school.

We've got to go back and see what impact we've had. Then we'll know if the study-visit really did make a difference!"

Pause for thought....?

How will we make sure there's space to agree on what worked well and what didn't as far as the organisation and conduct of the visit, and the follow-up, are concerned?



How will we feed the outcomes of our visit back into future network activity and into work in host and visitor schools?

What should the focus of the next visit be?

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All of these reference sources can be downloaded directly from **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc** by clicking on 'What are we learning about...?' or 'Network Research' respectively.



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**National College for
School Leadership**
Triumph Road
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155
F: 0115 872 2001
E: nlc@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

Networked Learning Communities

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