NCSL
National College for
School Leadership

Network leadership in action:

What does a network activist do?

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Networked Learning Communities

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

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One of the distinctive features of successful networks is dedicated facilitation and leadership. This may come from one person or from a small team, depending on the scale of the network and the nature of its activities.

As part of the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme, the National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has been conducting research amongst network leaders and others in leadership and support roles in school networks to find out how they have interpreted their roles. What has emerged is an understanding of the key issues facing leaders and an appreciation of the complexity and importance of their role in school networks.

The tools in this series have been generated largely through the work of the Networked Learning Communities programme over the past two years. They draw upon the findings of a research seminar, the outcomes of a collaborative enquiry undertaken by Ron Ritchie and the NLC steering group, and from collaborative work with Demos.

Key roles
This tool is structured around a series of key roles. Although they might not all become critical immediately after the launch of the network, they may become issues if they are not planned for at the beginning. This approach was informed by the question 'What would I have liked to have known before I started?'

Reflective questions
The reflective questions are designed to challenge thinking about the systems and processes of a network to enable the key roles to be tackled successfully.

Possible starting points
These provide suggestions and ideas about how you might approach the questions. Sometimes these are quite formal, where they have been synthesised from a discussion or taken from some of the outcomes generated. Occasionally they are statements or direct quotes from an individual.

Examples from practice
Also included are some examples from practice to illustrate how network leaders and others in leadership and support roles in school networks have tackled certain issues and challenges.

	Key roles	Reflective questions
Modelling	Network activists demonstrate for their colleagues what participation in the network looks like. They engage in different kinds of activities that make the network come to life. They are the living examples of how things can be done differently. Network activists are positive in their outlook and entrepreneurial in their approach. They are relentless in recruiting others to the work they are involved in and advocate for network activities within and beyond the network. They collaborate with a range of people across the network, and in doing so, help those colleagues to build their own skills for working in collaboration with other professionals.	■ Who are the convertible sceptics in the network? What kinds of evidence might convince them to participate? ■ How will you make your involvement in the network and the benefits that you accrue visible and accessible to colleagues? ■ What opportunities exist for you to publicise the work you are involved in within your school or your network? ■ What kinds of collaborative processes are most effective for moving network activities forward? How will you explain them? ■ What is the best thing that you've been involved in? Who else might benefit?
Making connections	Network activists often participate in more than one group or activity in a network. They are the people who 'carry' ideas, knowledge and practice from one part of the network to another. Network activists are also the principle source of intelligence for the leaders of the network – they may even be in the leadership team themselves – and are well placed to advise network leaders about what's working, what's making a difference and what's not. Crucially, network activists keep the structures and processes of the network connected with, and relevant to, the day-to-day lives of the pupils and adults in the schools that they serve.	■ Who decides who can/should participate in what groups or activities in the network? ■ How do groups communicate with each other? With the network leadership? ■ How will you ensure that decision making and adult learning processes within the network are linked to the pupil learning focus? ■ What are the evaluation and review processes that will enable the outcomes and insights from groups and activities to inform leadership decisions?
Keeping it real	Organisational structures and learning processes are important to networks and, because they are so complex, it can sometimes seem that the job of leading and managing a network is entirely focused on setting up and maintaining such systems. But the life-blood of the network, its purpose and what will sustain it in the long term, is its pupil learning focus. Network activists live out this commitment in their contribution to and leadership of network activities. They keep the development of the network rooted in the needs of and evidence from practice that makes a difference to outcomes for young people.	■ How will you choose and refine a pupil learning focus? How can you involve others in this process? How will you explain it to those you can't involve? ■ What enquiry processes will you put in place so that you collect relevant and convincing evidence about the outcomes of your activities? ■ What adult learning opportunities will you offer and how will you ensure they impact on pupil learning outcomes? ■ What areas of practice will you prioritise for improvement in order to optimise the opportunities that being in a network creates?
Learning how to lead	Sustainability depends on a network's capacity to foster leadership at all levels. Partly this is about distributing the responsibility and opportunity that leadership represents. Partly it is about succession planning and developing the skills and experience necessary to lead the network in the future. Through participation in network activities, network activists encounter and work in a range of contexts across the network. They learn the skills of collaboration through working with diverse groups and develop effective adult learning strategies to involve colleagues and to share their ideas and insights.	■ What opportunities are there for you to reflect, with colleagues and alone, on the leadership learning opportunities that network activism presents? ■ How can you connect network activities into formal CPD and leadership learning programmes, including those that carry accreditation? ■ How explicit is the connection between network activism, distributed leadership and succession planning in your network? What effect does this have on who volunteers or how participants are selected? ■ What form does leadership take in your group or activity? Do you lead enquiry and adult learning? How do you relate these activities to your 'day job' and any leadership responsibilities you may have elsewhere?
Spreading the word	Word of mouth from a credible source is an effective form of communication in complex organisations like schools and networks of schools. In advocating for and explaining network activities at staff meetings, training days and network events, network activists contribute significantly to making the network real and visible and to creating opportunities for others to participate. Network activists who present their work at conferences and seminars represent the network as a vibrant learning organisation that is creating new knowledge and new practice on behalf of all the adults and young people that comprise it. Finally, when network activists produce artefacts such as resources and lesson plans that others can use, they ensure that the work of the network will travel into classrooms where it is most likely to impact on pupil learning outcomes.	■ How do you get access to time at staff meetings and training days in your own school and in others to publicise the outcomes of network groups or activities? ■ What are the different ways in which you will represent and communicate your work? ■ Where are the formal and informal channels of communication in schools and in the network? ■ What is your relationship with your headteacher? How often do you discuss network activities? ■ What conferences and seminars will you attend on behalf of the network? How will you make sure that others in the network benefit? ■ What connections will you make with other networks in your Local Authority or further afield? How will you keep those connections alive?

Establish a range of groups and activities that create opportunities to model different kinds of learning and leadership:

■ study or enquiry groups
■ curriculum and resource development
■ steering and reference groups
■ coaching and mentoring
■ Networked Learning Walks

Be explicit about the reasons for your choices and decisions. Share your ideas, your successes and your mistakes. Help colleagues to understand what involvement in the network really means by:

■ being honest about how you make time for any additional work
■ explaining how network activities complement your existing work
■ sharing your professional aspirations and how participation in the network contributes to achieving them

Finding connections – people, processes or focus – between the different groups and activities you are involved in within school and in the network will help you to transfer learning from one place to another and to test ideas and outcomes in a range of contexts. Fragmented and incoherent participation in lots of disparate groups and activities, however tempting and exciting it might seem, militates against deep learning.

Keeping a journal will enable you to make evidence-based contributions, formal and informal, to discussions that influence decision making in the network. You could also gather the ideas and perceptions of other participants and represent them on such occasions.

What most practitioners, including school leaders, find compelling is evidence from colleagues that innovations in practice are having a positive effect for pupils in their context – will this help our kids to do better?

Gather and share evidence about how network activity:

■ motivates and retains talented and experienced teachers
■ encourages collaboration – teacher-teacher and pupil-pupil
■ involves pupils in metacognition – understanding how, why and what they are learning
■ fosters new relationships between pupils and teachers, centred on teaching and learning
■ improves attendance, motivation and behaviour amongst hard to reach pupils

For most practitioners, participation in a network takes the form of access to collaborative adult learning opportunities that relate to the pupil learning focus. Specialist coaching, peer coaching and collaborative enquiry are the most effective models for adult learning in networks because they:

■ are rooted in data and evidence from research and practice
■ structure and sustain professional dialogue
■ build the trust necessary to encourage risk-taking and experimentation

Using these approaches in network groups and activities builds capacity and ownership and ensures that network innovations can become embedded in classroom practice.

Facilitating and refining a tight and evidence-based learning focus in your group that falls within the overall agenda for the network, will mean that together you can build a secure and detailed set of outcomes to convince colleagues.

■ Meet formally or informally with other network activists and make time to discuss your role and what you are learning.

■ Find someone that you can work with in a peer coaching partnership. Communicate regularly by telephone and email to stay in touch between meetings.

■ Keep a journal.

■ Approach a member of the network leadership team to arrange shadowing or coaching opportunities. Ask lots of questions of network leaders.

■ Encourage them to make their experience and ideas explicit and accessible so that you (and others) can learn from them.

■ Read network publications – newsletters, reports, reviews, enquiry outcomes – and stay abreast of wider network developments. Keep the connections between your work in school and in the network and the broader network agenda alive by offering feedback and suggestions to those leading the work represented in these publications. Offer copy yourself.

■ Register for NPQH or a higher degree. Think about how you can use your network activities to develop and to demonstrate your leadership potential.

Using existing communications channels – pigeon-holes, notice-boards, department or year group meetings – is almost always more effective than setting up new ones. If a website or intranet is underused in school, putting network information on it is unlikely to change things.

Twilight sessions are ideal for cross-network meetings, workshops etc. Use the money you save on supply cover to book a good venue and offer refreshments. Dinner in the evening often introduces a welcome social dimension to the occasion. Participants are more likely to sustain their involvement if they feel valued and enjoy the meetings.

■ Learn to use video effectively. Communicating complex interventions is much better achieved through visual media. Testimony from pupils and practitioners is more powerful and convincing if its delivered in person. Video footage can be used in coaching arrangements and can save time and money as a substitute for peer observation.

■ Choose to present at conferences and seminars where you are likely to learn something of use to your network. It can be tempting to play to your strengths and to focus on your own contribution to the event (presentation, exhibition etc) especially if you are nervous. But making yourself vulnerable and offering your work up for critical friendship and feedback will create a more satisfying learning opportunity for you and for your audience. Visiting other workshop sessions will also ensure you stay in touch with what's going on elsewhere. Never go to a conference on your own.

Examples from practice

We have a group of 'lead learners', practitioners who lead activities in each of the different schools. The way each school does its work varies according to the context, especially the size, of the school. I have been developing a peer coaching programme with the support of a consultant from the Local Authority.

One of the things I learned last year was how influential friendship groups are in the staff room. And people know members of staff in other network schools too. Understanding these informal networks is really helpful if you're trying to get an idea in front of the right person or to mobilise colleagues at critical times.

You have to be resilient. I have colleagues who find it very hard to accept that there might be areas where they could improve, let alone that I could help them – I'm much younger than most of the other teachers in my school. But I have the resources of the network and the evidence from the research we've been doing in our study group and the deputy head is really enthusiastic, so we're getting there.

In the first year I volunteered for everything and took on far too much. This year I have been more strategic in my choices and have decided to focus on peer coaching. I have realised how much I learn from observing other people (I used to think I would learn most from having others observe me) so I am trying to develop my coaching skills through the assessment for learning work. My school is also a training school and I've been approached to get involved in mentoring next year so this is good preparation.

Every half term, the research co-ordinators meet with the co-leaders of the network to update them on progress with the various projects we're involved in. There's more regular informal communication because there are heads involved in some of the groups and the co-leaders are in a couple themselves, but the half termly meetings are the place where we share findings, agree timescales and resources and make sure we're all on track. It's good to hear what's going on in all the other projects too.

We worked with numeracy and literacy consultants from the Local Authority to agree a pupil learning focus that would address some of the more intransigent problems facing network schools. So we have a clear focus on underachievement in maths at Key Stage 2 which fits with their development priorities and attracts resources from the Primary National Strategy (PNS) and the Local Authority.

We're taking a strategic approach to CPD this year. Between literacy and numeracy training and the individual development needs that teachers themselves agree in school, it's hard to find time for the additional sessions that we need to bring people on board with the network. I was asked to join the steering group as a CPD co-ordinator and I'm working with the school based co-ordinators, PNS consultants and headteachers to get a sense of all the opportunities and to try to put things together differently so that they represent a coherent offer.

I was approached by the local university to work in partnership to develop a module to support and to accredit collaborative enquiry activity in the network. Participants receive training in enquiry methods and the university has been very flexible and imaginative in thinking about how to assess the outcomes in the context of a formal Master's programme.

The lead learners have an action learning set that meets once a month. We each bring an issue or problem to work through, and are supported by a facilitator to use the group and the process to help us to develop a sound understanding of the leadership challenges we face and to work out some solutions together.

I began as a research co-ordinator in the first year of the network and now I am a co-leader. Every aspect of my leadership practice is characterised by enquiry. I can't think of a better way to model effective leadership than to ask good and important questions and to involve your colleagues in gathering evidence that helps you to answer them.

Having to put workshops and presentations together to explain your work encourages you to reflect on progress and learning to date. When you go back to the network, you find that you have formulated the work in new and different ways and you can use that insight to inform planning and development. Feedback and interaction with the work of other networks helps too.

We keep an archive of all the reports, publications and resources that are generated by the network. When we are asked to account for time and money, we always have something tangible to offer. We also find that having artefacts enables us to exemplify what can be quite abstract and complicated when we are explaining the network's focus and activities in order to publicise or to recruit to the network.

We attended a networked conference earlier this year. Five of us went together, and we planned carefully which workshops we should all go to so that we gathered as many ideas and resources as we could. When we got back, we spent half a day helping each other to make sense of everything we had seen and heard and thinking through the implications for our own work.

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