National College for School Leadership

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International perspectives on networked learning

Networked Learning Communities

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

Foreword

At the 2004 Annual Conference of the American Education Research Association (AERA), Professor Lorna Earl and Dr Steven Katz of Aporia Consulting Ltd hosted an invitational symposium of international experts. They were chosen because their fields of research expertise each contributed distinctively to the theoretical underpinnings of school improvement networks. The primary purpose of the symposium was to design a set of research questions to inform the external evaluation of the UK's National College for School Leadership (NCSL) Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme. Involving 130 networks and more than 1,500 schools, it was at that point the largest network-based school improvement programme in the world. The symposium formed the basis for the 'key features' investigation of the NLC programme which reported in May 2005, which in turn will lead to a final impact evaluation in 2006.

Subsequent to the seminar, participants were invited to submit think pieces drawn from their own research, which might further inform the development of learning networks. These pieces provide a unique set of perspectives based on expert knowledge of innovation networks. They collectively consider possibilities and challenges facing schools working in networks across the globe.

Whilst the original intention was that these pieces would provide support and challenge to those leading the NLC programme, in the time between their initial presentation and publication here, learning networks have emerged as one of the foundation development strategies across the national education scene in the UK. For this reason the think pieces, which began as an internal dialogue between international experts and NCSL, have become highly relevant to a far wider audience – in particular to those who lead networks and those intermediaries in the system who support them.

The aim of this volume, then, is to make available to a range of audiences these international perspectives. They will inform and challenge developing learning networks. They contain some of the questions that networks will need to ask themselves in order that their potential can be realised.

With the emphasis on collaborative dialogue, it seems appropriate that the individually presented papers are reproduced here as putative conversations between thinkers, grouped according to shared themes and content. These conversations provide a number of examples of how successful networks operate in practice. They use the evidence of network practice to argue persuasively for the potential power of NLCs to enlarge school choices, strengthen professionalism, create relationships of trust, enrich practitioner dialogue, and to bring about change in practice and in systems. Further, they describe features of learning networks critical to their success and sustainability: an ability to self-evaluate, to maintain 'inquiry-mindedness', to conceptualise leadership in terms

of practitioner expertise and successful classroom practice, and to instil a productive flexibility in their structures and processes.

The contributions which follow articulate a shared conviction that because participants' needs and local contexts will always be changing, networks are characterised by productive tensions which call their emergent properties into question. This said, the papers do offer a guide to what learning networks might call success, and therefore will encourage learning network participants to see better how they might provide confidence in the efficacy of their work.

The contributing authors in alphabetical order:
David N Aspin, *Monash University, Australia*
Judith D Chapman, *Australian Catholic University*
David P Crandall, *The NETWORK Inc.*
Amanda Datnow, *University of Southern California*
Ben Levin, *University of Manitoba*
Ann Lieberman, *Columbia University*
Joseph Murphy, *Vanderbilt University*
Jan M Robertson, *University of Waikato*
James P Spillane, *Northwestern University*
Louise Stoll, *International Congress for School Effectiveness and School Improvement*
Jonathan Supovitz, *University of Pennsylvania*
Helen Timperley, *University of Auckland*
Priscilla Wohlstetter, *University of Southern California*

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There are inevitable tensions between the idea of learning networks, which are based on ideas of capacity building as a key to reform, and a strong recent history, in Britain and elsewhere, of education reform through central policy mandate, which remains the dominant order of the day in education.

By and large, mandated reforms have not worked very well (Hopkins & Levin, 2000; Levin, 2001; Levin, 2004). They are often poorly designed and badly implemented, too inflexible to meet varying local conditions, inadequately resourced, create opposition on the part of teachers, are modified to suit varying political pressures in ways that work against their purposes, and often abandoned before they have a chance to bear fruit.

These problems are not simply due to incompetence or so-called 'political' considerations. Rather, they reflect enduring realities of government, including the need to please or placate diverse and conflicting views, lack of public understanding of the complexities of education policy, having to deal with too many issues for the available time, and the demands of electoral politics (Levin, 2002, in press). These problems cannot readily be overcome through better intentions.

Central policy mandates can, if well done, have some strengths. They can provide a common sense of direction, focus resources – whether new or reallocated – on key tasks and provide a basis on which effective networks can be built.

Learning networks are in large measure the mirror image of central policies. The strengths of networks lie in respect for local context and practitioner knowledge and in their focus on building engagement and capacity among participants. The potential weaknesses of learning networks are also largely the obverse of those of central policy approaches. Learning networks can lack focus and can become self-indulgent. They can celebrate practitioner knowledge or local context to the point where difficult questions do not get raised and feeling good about one's current state becomes more important than looking carefully and objectively at student success and how it might be improved.

These differences suggest that advocates of central policy are likely to be uncomfortable with learning networks because the latter have the potential to undermine the former, whereas proponents of learning networks may actively dislike central policy approaches because they violate most of their deepest beliefs about how effective schools can be fostered. A substantial amount of the literature on education reform mirrors these different views and can result easily in a dialogue of the deaf between people whose basic assumptions are highly divergent. The danger is that the two streams may carry on in mutual suspicion if not active hostility, with the result that neither will be as effective as it might.

Central policy and learning networks could actually complement each other by bringing together different and equally necessary strengths while curbing each other's excesses.

For leaders of learning networks, two strategies are critical: to ensure that networks give significant and meaningful attention to the key objectives of central policies; and to guard against the tendency towards whining or self-congratulation rather than hard action. Two key elements will be for learning networks to demonstrate publicly that their work is connected to key priorities and to produce some evidence of outcomes. Networks should have flexibility as to which central priorities they take up and how they address them, but it should not be difficult for each learning network to provide some evidence as to how its work does connect to improved learning, greater inclusion, reduced gaps, stronger ties with parents and families, and so on. Learning networks need to give serious attention to what sorts of outcomes they could demonstrate that would provide some confidence in the efficacy of their work (Leithwood & Levin, 2004). Although each learning network is, appropriately, different in its approach and interests, there would have to be some commonality in measures across networks to demonstrate their impact. Participant satisfaction is not a sufficient demonstration of impact.

The second need is to ensure that learning networks are sufficiently 'hard-nosed' in their work. Learning networks need to put themselves deliberately into contact – perhaps as 'critical friends' – with people who do not necessarily share their assumptions and goals. Efforts should be made specifically to build ongoing relationships between learning networks and key central policy managers such as regional directors of the various DfES strategies. Commitment to the evaluation of activities and outcomes will also tend to focus attention on whether activities are actually making a meaningful difference.

For central policy managers, two strategies are also important: to work with learning networks as a way of generating local capacity and commitment to educational improvement; and to provide a sufficient degree of local autonomy and flexibility in policy implementation to allow learning networks to become important allies on key priorities. It cannot be expected that learning networks will necessarily embrace central policy goals or approaches in their entirety. Learning networks need to be able to be critical of central policy directions in specific areas. Still, it would be highly desirable to find ways in which learning networks could be part of larger strategies – for example as sounding boards to test the impact and efficacy of various strategic initiatives or as partners in professional development related to key initiatives.

Policies that are strong on goals and flexible on means sound good but are often hard to do. Central policy managers tend to be confident that they know what is needed and suspicious that local people will subvert their efforts, so there is often unwillingness to give much ground on policy directions. Also, large organisations such as governments tend to bureaucratise their work so that compliance with procedures becomes more important than achievement of goals. Learning networks might play a useful role here precisely by reflecting back areas where policy is and is not working well.

Finally, it is important that advocates of both approaches should see the potential that learning networks provide to learn more about how local autonomy and capacity can work with central policy to improve teaching and learning practices in schools.

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Networks as a force for change

Why networks and why now?

Judith D Chapman, and David N Aspin

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What is a network?

The important point to make about the concept of network is that it differs in nature from other terms that have historically been used in association with educational institutions and with the organisational arrangements with which they are managed and through which innovation and change have typically been brought about.

The idea of networks is distinct from traditional forms of grouping of educational organisations and systems, in which hierarchical structures and organisational approaches were most often adopted, and from the more recent emphases in which the market philosophy prevailed.

In contrast to such approaches, the notion of network stresses the idea of community as the common element and principle of connection between institutions, organisations, agencies and people.

In this approach, learning providers are not talked of as clusters, which simply connotes geographical proximity, nor groups, which suggests an almost accidental agglomeration of disparate institutions.

In networks, people and institutions are overtly associated with each other in forms of connection and relationship that are deliberately established and worked upon in the pursuit of a commonality of interests, concerns and goals.

Networks are intentional constructions, linked together in a web of common purposes. They are self-conscious and deliberately established organic entities in which all the constituent elements are equal in the weight of enmeshment that they carry and the responsibility that they bear for making contributions towards the whole.

Why networks?

Networks provide a new construct for conceiving of educational provision and a new vehicle for achieving change.

Networks offer a means of assisting in the policy implementation process. If we are going to raise standards in education there is a need to link policy both horizontally and vertically. Networks are one way of achieving this linkage.

Networks provide a process for cultural and attitudinal change, embedding reform in the interactions, actions and behaviour of a range of different stakeholders in education and the community.

Networks provide a multi-agency vehicle for reform that has the potential to be more supportive, co-operative, less costly and less disruptive than much of the wide-scale structural change of the past.

Networks provide an opportunity for shared and dispersed leadership and responsibility, drawing on resources in the community beyond members of the education profession. In so doing they can provide a more cost-effective, community-based reform strategy.

Networks can be capacity building, in so far as they are able to produce new knowledge and mutual learnings that can then feed back and inform public policy.

A concern for networks moves attention away from recent preoccupations with micro-level change at the individual site. Networks are able to function at the meso-level to strengthen interconnections and spread innovation across all levels: the micro-, meso- and macro-levels.
Through the dissemination of network knowledge, both policy development and practice may be enhanced in important areas of national concern.

Networks have the potential to bring together the policy, resource and practice dimension of educational reform. If networks are successful they hold the possibility of changing the environment in which policy makers operate. They provide the opportunity for the environment and the system to become recultured in ways that are more co-operative, interconnected and multi-agency. They have a capacity for evolutionary transformation and renewal in changing aspirations, ways of working together and provision of learning opportunities.

The commitment to working together that underpins networks incorporates the notion of working together at all levels, including government. In this way networks provide an opportunity for more effective policy development and implementation at all levels through a wide array of agencies in the community.

Why now?

There are sound grounds for the growth and adoption of this idea in organisational and institutional life and for understanding educational innovation and change at this time.

As opposed to more traditional views, based upon principles of disciplinary difference and demarcation, workers in the philosophy of science and language more recently have argued that the world of theory, knowledge, and learning grows and develops holistically. Such learning is integrated in much the same way as the gradual construction and extension of the spider's web. Each strand of thought is capable of connection to neighbouring or even distant other strands, along a tracery of cognitive connections that constitutes an overall reticulation – a unified and unifying cognitive nexus – of the theory we have about the world,

the ways in which we cognise and think about it and the moves we make when we are challenged to learn something new and so change it by expanding it further. (See Quine and Ullian, 1970 and Wilson, 1998).

New lines of social, political and administrative thought have also functioned to provide an increasingly powerful basis for consideration of networks arising from the envisioning of learning organisations and systems as communities and their conceptualisation as important nodes in the evolution and establishment of learning networks. In recent years notions of the community, as articulated and developed by such writers as Sandel (1981), McIntyre (1980), Etzioni (1996) and Gray (1997), have been enormously influential in revitalising and re-directing social and political thinking. Notions of community have laid the basis for the establishment and elaboration of new ways of thinking about political morality, public policy, and administrative relations, and the creation of new social forms, structures and interactions, that have wide-ranging implications for education and its institutions. The notion of networks is an inherent part of these considerations.

Internationally the concept of network has been seen to be of increasing relevance in the operationalisation of lifelong learning. The world-view of the late 19th and early 20th centuries stressed the idea of learning as linear, sequential, generalisable and mechanistic, and organised approaches to learning were predicated upon that idea. Educational institutions became characterised by hierarchical organisational structures. Learning was arranged along the lines of rigid divisions and departments. Knowledge was compartmentalised into discrete and manageable parts and sequences Assessment came to be based on the measurable and the quantifiable. Approaches to and methods of learning promoted the acquisition of facts and information constituting worthwhile knowledge.

Such assumptions concerning human mental processes, such approaches to learning and such models of the proper organisation of schooling are no longer considered adequate – even if they were ever valid – to meet the demands of learners preparing for the changed economic and social conditions, cognitive climate and intellectual demands of the 21st century. It is now widely accepted that new thinking about the nature of learning and new conceptions of the styles of effective learning, which students find best suited to their own modes of cognitive progress and achievement, must lay the basis for learning. Approaches to learning constructed along such lines will more accurately reflect the findings and implications of current accounts of learning and the acquisition of knowledge and understanding worked out in accordance with the cognitive and meta-cognitive science of our times.

There are also economic arguments in support of the importance of the notion of networks. The OECD Study on *Sustainable Flexibility*, for example, argues that, in the new information and knowledge-based economy of the 21st century, with

rapidly changing technologies and markets for products, the nature of work will be transformed. This in turn will alter expectations regarding the kind of worker required. This transformation will be characterised by flexibility and networking, in which there will be a complex interplay between more highly educated workers prepared to learn more quickly to take on new tasks and to move from one job to another, and best-practice firms promoting increased flexibility through general training, multiple-task jobs, and employee decision making. (OECD 1997, p 34).

How should we study networks?

There is now a need for a progressive research programme to study and evaluate networks. Such a programme might include:

- sustained conceptual, analytical and empirical studies of networks as a construct and strategy for educational reform
- clarification of the conceptual and practical issues relevant to the concept of networks and the role of networks in stimulating learning, innovation and change
- consideration of what is new and specific about networks as a strategy for reform
- identification of the values that underpin and pervade networks
- an examination of the conditions that enable networks to be established and sustained, the opportunities, barriers and challenges to their operation, who the stakeholders are and their functions, what makes networks work and not work
- studies of the individual and public impacts and outcomes of networks; how networks build a capacity to learn for individuals, agencies and organisations
- consideration of the ways in which networks contribute to systemic change and improved policy and practice, and the ways in which policy can support networks

Conclusion

We have argued that networks provide a new construct for conceiving of educational provision and a new vehicle for achieving educational change. Networks have the potential to raise educational standards through linking policy both horizontally and vertically. They provide a multi-agency vehicle for reform, drawing on resources in the community beyond the education profession to provide a more cost-effective, community-based reform strategy. They can be capacity building, in so far as they are able to produce new knowledge and mutual learnings which can then feed back and inform public policy.

If networks are successful they have the potential to change the environment in which policy makers operate as they provide the opportunity for the environment to be recultured in ways that are more co-operative, interconnected and multi-agency. In these ways they provide an opportunity for more effective

policy implementation at all levels through a wide range of agencies in the community. There is now a need for a progressive research programme to be undertaken on the topic of networks. Such a research programme will provide an opportunity to assess whether the potential of networks is realisable. If so, networks will provide policy makers, educators and members of the community with the opportunity to contribute in innovative ways to the achievement of the international goal of making lifelong learning a reality for all.

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Networked leadership

Practice is the heart of the matter: Distributed leadership and Networked Learning Communities

James P Spillane and Helen Timperley

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James P Spillane and Helen Timperley

Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) have exciting possibilities but are complex to manage. Traditional thinking about solo leaders running schools or networks does not begin to capture how to make the networks among groups of schools successful in promoting improvements to pupil, adult and leadership learning.

Distributed leadership is a topic which has enjoyed a great deal of attention among educators in recent years. Some see distributed leadership as synonymous with terms like 'shared leadership', 'team leadership' and 'democratic leadership'. Some use the term to denote that the work of school leadership involves multiple leaders, others to argue that leadership is an organisational, as distinct from an individual, quality. Others use distributed leadership to define a particular way of thinking about the practice of school leadership. Distributed leadership is not monolithic; it takes on different meanings depending on the source. It is not surprising then, that observers are often confused as to the meaning and entailments of distributed leadership.

Furthermore, although leadership has always been distributed in schools, until recently we have not really begun to understand how it is distributed, because the focus of research has been on identifying the personal characteristics of the so-called 'heroic leader', positioned at the top of the hierarchy and influencing others towards their organisational vision. For a number of reasons, this vision of leadership has proved unsustainable: there are insufficient numbers of such people for all our schools; their achievements are often short-lived; and many potentially effective leaders have been discouraged from seeking promotion because of the perceived impossibility of emulating that kind of leader. In reality, we have many highly effective leaders who make very different contributions to leadership practice.

Practice is the heart of the matter

Distributed leadership emphasises practice or activity rather than personality. From a distributed leadership perspective, practice is the heart of the matter. In analysing practice, of course leadership roles, structures, routines and functions are important considerations. But leadership practice is the starting or anchoring point. A distributed leadership perspective frames leadership practice as a product of the interactions of school leaders, followers and their situation. Practice is a co-production, generated in or defined by the interactions of these three elements rather than a function of what leaders know and can do. It is these interactions, rather than particular actions, that are critical in understanding leadership practice. This latter point is essential from a distributed perspective and one that is frequently missed and misunderstood in discussions about distributed leadership. Leadership practice is not just something that is done to followers; followers co-produce leadership in interaction with leaders. Situation is also constitutive of leadership practice. It defines leadership practice in interaction with leaders and followers. So, leadership practice is not only distributed across people, it is also distributed over aspects of the situation in which the practice takes place: routines, tools and structures. Situation is more than a container for practice.

So when leaders ask themselves the question: "How do I promote improved pupil learning?" there is no right answer because the specifics of a given leadership activity take place in a particular context. A distributed leadership perspective sees this context as part of the leadership activity, both shaping it and being shaped by it. That said, the interactions within NLCs create very complex contexts and it is easy to get diverted from the central purpose of improving pupil learning when trying to manage all the interactions and relationships among and within the schools. By keeping the spotlight on how the network activities impact directly on pupil learning, some of these diversions may be prevented. In addition to this, certain contexts are particularly challenging when trying to keep the focus on this central purpose. Competing interests dominating the interactions among participants would be one example. Reviewing together how the resolution of these conflicts serves the main purpose of the network and how the leaders can collectively shape it to ensure that it does so will help to keep the network focused on its central purpose.

Staying coherent

Distributed leadership is more than dividing up tasks or responsibilities among different individuals who perform defined and separate roles. Rather, it recognises that leadership involves dynamic interactions between multiple leaders involved in the execution of both separate and overlapping leadership activities. The important leadership task is to understand how it all works together. NLCs provide significant challenges when 'keeping a handle' on this big picture. Many people are involved in a range of complex activities, and leadership positions are often assumed without formal responsibility or authority.

Some important review questions for leaders of Networked Learning Communities:

- which activities promote the kinds of interactions that address the key aspects of the vision for the network?
- which activities divert the focus from the vision and how might they be redefined in ways that are more productive?
- who keeps an eye on the big picture to ensure that the complex leadership activities fit together to maintain the important work of the network?
- how do network activities and ideas mesh with individual schools' activities in ways that maintain the integrity of each participating school's organisational and instructional coherence?

Staying connected

Unless a school is very small, it typically has different leaders and groups undertaking different leadership functions and routines. Traditionally, headteachers have responsibility for the big picture, middle managers have responsibility for smaller organisational units (such as a department or year group) and teachers focus on classrooms. These 'units' need to stay connected if the school is to maintain coherence. Failure to stay connected may mean that the school will develop patches of brilliance as well as places where things do not work well. These connecting mechanisms can be described as 'boundary spanners'.

In the same way, networks of schools need connecting mechanisms. A relatively familiar idea is having people acting as boundary spanners in co-ordinating roles. Less familiar is the idea that when teachers take on leadership responsibilities (or leaders take on teaching responsibilities) they are more likely to be able to span leadership and teaching boundaries and to develop a better appreciation of the place of each in the bigger picture. Similarly, if individuals participate in more than one networked group and they take some responsibility for ensuring coherence in the developing ideas of each group, they are more likely to keep the groups connected with one another. When establishing leadership positions within the network, therefore, it is important to keep in mind their potential for acting as connecting mechanisms among different network activities. Materials

such as written documents can also act as boundary spanners. Meeting agendas and minutes, for example, can help to keep others informed and can help keep networks connected. Achievement data acts as a boundary spanner across schools and, when shared by groups of teachers and leaders, can help to keep the focus of network activities on improving pupil learning.

The subject matters

School leadership practice differs depending on the school subject. Who leads, the involvement of formally designated leaders (school principal, assistant principal), how leaders think about the work of leadership and the role of followers in leadership practice differs by school subject. Specifically, the manner in which leadership is distributed over leaders, followers, and aspects of the situation varies depending on whether the subject being taught is mathematics, science or arts and humanities.

Account of practice

A study in elementary (primary) schools in the USA found that there were fewer leaders in mathematics compared with arts and humanities and fewer still in science. Leadership of literacy typically involved the principal and or assistant principal, a co-ordinator or specialist teacher leaders and often an external consultant. In maths, subject leadership in some schools (though not all) involved the principal or assistant principal, lead teachers and sometimes external consultants, whereas leadership in science was typically confined to classroom teachers, few of whom had any official designation such as senior teacher or co-ordinator. While leadership was distributed across multiple leaders, the range of distribution and the involvement of formally designated leaders was much greater in language arts than in both maths and science.

Leaders' cognitive schemas for the work of instructional leadership also varied depending on the subject matter. Viewing literacy as a subject that cut across the entire curriculum, leaders understood it as an overarching measure of student and school progress and saw integrating reading across the curriculum as the key task of their work. With respect to mathematics, leaders saw their key task to be one of ensuring teachers adhered closely to the sequence of skills in the curriculum. Their thinking about expertise for instructional improvement also differed depending on the subject matter. They saw their own school community as the primary source of expertise for leading change in language arts instruction. Expertise was in-house and homegrown, and the school was the locus of control for instructional change. In contrast, leaders understood the expertise for improving pupil learning in maths to lie with external programmes. Expertise for leading change in maths lay beyond the schoolhouse walls.

Observation of leadership activities for maths and language arts showed there were notable differences in how leaders and followers participated. Specifically, the ways in which leaders and followers participated, the manner in which they reasoned about their work, the norms for constructing knowledge and establishing direction for instructional improvement differed, depending on the subject matter. In leadership activities for literacy there was a balance between leaders' and teachers' talk, with teachers and leaders offering ideas and strategies about how to teach literacy. In contrast, duirng maths leadership activities, the leaders (often fulltime classroom teachers) dominated the conversation, doing most of the talking. Teachers' advice networks about teaching also differed depending on the subject matter. Specifically teachers' advice networks for maths tended to be sparse, fragmented into three or four groups that were not connected and not nearly as robust compared to their advice networks for language arts. Advice networks for language arts included more key advice givers and were more integrated than the maths network.

In NLCs, teachers and leaders are expected to create and exchange knowledge collaboratively and continuously, to reflect deeply on teaching and learning and to take up difficult challenges. Creating collaborations that support the creation and exchange of knowledge is likely to pose different challenges for teachers and leaders with a background in different curriculum areas, so it is important to take into account how they think about the work of improving teaching and learning differently, depending on their subject. Further, it is important to prepare for the fact that how teachers might participate in these collaborations may depend on their subject specialism.

Coherence and vision

Traditional approaches to leadership recommend that organisational and instructional coherence can be established by creating a strong vision for a school that pervades the organisational culture. The activity focus of distributed leadership, however, places the lens on the things people do to enact those visions and create coherence. Visions are embedded in activities rather than inscribed on pieces of paper, and coherence is maintained by ensuring consistency in the multitude of day-to-day activities in individual schools within the network.

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Network structures and processes

Organising success: Dimensions of creative operationalism in Networked Learning Communities

Based on original papers by David P Crandall, Amanda Datnow, Ann Lieberman, Jonathan Supovitz and Priscilla Wohlstetter

Organising success: Dimensions of creative operationalism in Networked Learning Communities

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It is clear that there is a growing number of individuals who are attracted to working smarter together rather than harder alone because of a shared conviction that problems in schools are solved more effectively through collaboration. Among educational reformers and policy makers, there is an increased understanding that problems in education cannot easily be divided into pieces and addressed in isolation from each other. There may in fact be problems that are too large for any one school to solve on its own. Further to this, a belief in the power of joint problemsolving is the common feature of many different kinds of network. Educators are increasingly reaching beyond their school and district boundaries and seeking support through networks. Networks appear to be everywhere on the USA educational landscape as well as around the globe. Some networks are organised around a common goal, whereas others unite schools with a common organisational structure, such as small schools, charter schools or alternative schools. There are networks for teachers, principals, schools and even districts which share common issues or problems.

As we learn more about the proliferation of Networked Learning Communities (NLCs), their principles and activities, we understand more about their minutely differentiated purposes, configurations and achievements. We know that when individuals set up or join an NLC they hope that their new organisation will afford them support and knowledge beyond that which they would receive in the context of their own school. As studies into the lived experience of participation in NLCs continue, we are able to create an increasingly refined picture of how networks become organised for success. We become aware of the extent to which the unique culture within NLCs is giving rise to a kind of creative operationalism, whereby successful networks eventually share similar structures and processes which complement rather than detract from, or compromise, their flexibility and looseness.

The initial postulations of the Coalition for Essential Schools drew on the work of Lieberman, Hargreaves et al to provide a comprehensive set of features of an NLC:

- building trusting relationships through inquiry and work initiated or chosen by members because of their own needs and carried out together over time

- establishing norms of reflective practice and shared decision making, which provide internal avenues by which to share information
- the support of district and building leadership, including respect for true empowerment of teachers, parents and students rather than "contrived collegiality" in the service of administrative control
- a common purpose and the flexibility to adapt and revise that purpose together as the network evolves
- compelling activities that support the central purpose, allow for participants to share their own experience and extend intermittent transformative experiences into actual daily work
- crossing role groups to use both outside and inside knowledge balancing theory research and practice to solve common problems
- a reliable way to provide information to members
- structures and roles that diffuse responsibility and leadership among the members of the organisation
- an emphasis on informal personal connections in network activities even at the expense of efficiency or uniformity.

This kind of informed hypothesis of good network practice has been invaluable in the support and facilitation of NLCs in Britain and the USA. Especially persuasive then, is corroborating evidence which confirms, as expected, that where networked learning communities are working, structure and process begin to feature strongly as important elements of longer-term success. Schools across the USA are experimenting with networks (other schools or complementary organisations: school community partnerships) to improve school capacity and performance. These networks are developing successful ways to move beyond their own borders, leverage resources etc and provide a number of operational paradigms for capacity building and distributing leadership. In the case of reform networks, in existence for five years, they have learned particular ways of organising and defining themselves, thereby deepening their work. A discernible range of transportable social practices emerges as a key to understanding organised network activity:

- approaching each individual as a potentially valuable contributor
- teaching other teachers as a primary mode of learning
- creating public forums for sharing, dialogue and critique
- turning ownership over to learners
- situation learning in practice and relationships
- providing multiple entry points into the community
- reflecting on teaching through reflecting on learning
- sharing leadership
- adopting a stance of inquiry as a network
- rethinking professional identity and linking it to being a member of a professional community

Whilst it is not difficult to agree that these are desirable practices for networks, schools and professional learning communities, it is more difficult is to see precisely how these social practices lead to effective joint problem solving for NLCs, and what exactly these practices look like in reality. Below are examples of **three** of the identified transportable social practices: *creating public forums for sharing dialogue and critique*, *teaching other teachers as a primary mode of learning and adopting a stance of inquiry as a network.*

Creating public forums for sharing dialogue and critique

Various qualitative research studies of comprehensive school reform describe some of the ways in which networks have functioned as supports for educators in CSR schools. Being part of a network of CSR schools allows educators to share and find solutions to common problems. For example, in a study of schools implementing the Success for All (SFA) reform model, we found that SFA teacher leaders, or facilitators as they are called, got together on a regular basis with facilitators from other schools. As one facilitator explained, communicating with other facilitators allowed her to address problems without causing concern among those at her school site. She stated: "With the facilitators I have no qualms and they don't either of saying, 'Oh my God!' …You can't say it to anyone else. … The teachers just see I can handle this. So that's been very helpful having that." (Datnow & Castellano, 1999, p 59). Participating in a local network of Success for All facilitators allowed this facilitator to seek support from peers in like positions in other schools.

Teaching other teachers as a primary mode of learning

A second example of transportable social practice is Core Knowledge conferences. Reform design teams often hold annual conferences, allowing educators from across the USA to gather together once a year. This is the primary vehicle upon which the national networks operate in CSR models. In a study of schools implementing the Core Knowledge reform model, we found that teachers had extremely positive reactions to the annual conference. The national conference began in 1991 with about 100 participants and has grown to include over 2000 delegates. "Our best times together are those conferences," stated one teacher. A major benefit of attending Core Knowledge conferences is the opportunity to learn about how teachers in other Core Knowledge schools teach Core topics. Teachers also sometimes make lasting connections with teachers from other schools. This is especially useful for teachers in schools in remote areas. A teacher at one school stated: "I have made some really good friends at the conferences throughout the years. We see each other and we trade things back and forth." (Stringfield, Datnow, Borman & Rachuba, 1999, p.30)

Adopting a stance of inquiry as a network

Investigating the ways NLCs can use student performance data to inquire into their strategies and effectiveness provides summary evidence of data use in NLCs and helps us understand how the use of data can support a commitment to continual inquiry in networks. Using data to support inquiry can provide a learning focus for an NLC and contribute to the sustaining of good networking practice, a continual learning loop which provides learning opportunities for all. Three different types of assessment have been identified as the major sources of student performance data and can be described as:

- external assessments – those administered by the state and district
- school-wide assessments – those in which schools administered an assessment across a grade level or content area and aggregated the results to look at the classroom, grade and school level to identify patterns to inform instruction and strategic planning
- individual teacher assessments, which are a variety of rich classroom-based formal and informal assessments that individual teachers use to inform their instruction within their classroom

A range of ways was identified whereby assessments were used to inform teachers' instruction, to develop individual teacher development plans and training for larger groups, setting targets and celebrating achievement. Whilst these data facilitate external and individual assessment, school-wide assessments provide valuable opportunities for faculties to inquire together into the relationships between teaching practices and student learning. Such inquires can become part of the cultural glue that holds a school together. Perhaps one of the most important benefits of using student performance data is to build a culture of inquiring into the contributions of school factors to student learning. Continuous inquiry into the relationships between different instructional practices and student learning in different forms and on different measures sharpens individuals' skills at diagnosing the meaning of data patterns and crafting appropriate instructional responses. The ultimate purpose of an intertwined system of assessment built upon different data sources with different uses is to develop and exercise the habits of inquiring into the complex meaning of student results as they relate to the instructional practices of teachers and the organisational capacity-building strategies of school leaders. By incorporating the regular examination of student performance into the routines of the school year, teachers and school leaders can continually grow and refine their professional expertise.

This work highlights the importance of using data to support continual inquiry loops in NLCs, but it also points towards the crucial link between inquiry and a fourth transportable social practice: leadership.

Leadership: organising teams and key roles

Successful networks operate by creating a variety of work teams to conduct the business of reform. The work teams across the sample networks were remarkably similar to one another and resembled, in 'mission', the types of teams that private sector firms create to improve their organisational capacity. Networks typically created three types of work team to plan and implement improvements. Each of these teams provided the organisational venue for diverse stakeholders to team up, formulate common goals, and create and implement strategic plans for reform.

- **Management teams** provided direction, management and oversight for the overall reform effort. Management teams were often the groups responsible for creating the network's improvement plan. Management teams also controlled the distribution and use of network funds and often had wide stakeholder participation with teachers, administrators, classified personnel and parents from all network schools and organisations.
- **Integrating teams** co-ordinated activities across various components of the network. Integrating teams made decisions related to activities across schools and organisations within the network, such as how to assist students transitioning from elementary to middle school or middle to high school.
- **Improvement teams** focused on making improvements to teaching and learning in the areas prioritised in the network's improvement plan. Improvement teams contributed to networks by developing the curriculum and supporting the adoption of new instructional strategies.

In addition to these leadership teams, there are four evident leadership roles upon which the establishment of effective networks relies: champion, architect, information broker and boundary spanner.

The champion

The champion initiated and nurtured the network in its early stages. This leader had access to the requisite resources and the energy to persist in moving the network in the right direction. In the sample networks, champions were often the cheerleaders and visionaries in the network organisation – the leaders who thought outside the box and effectively communicated big and innovative ideas to stakeholders and potential partners.

The architect

Once the school established a partnership with another organisation, the architects were responsible for creating the structure of the network and laying the groundwork for participation by stakeholders. In the high-performing networks we studied, the architects increased the credibility and effectiveness of decisions by dispersing power and authority broadly throughout the network. They created structures, such as work teams (as noted earlier) that fostered active participation by stakeholders in the network, leading to greater commitment. In the other networks, stakeholders were not empowered to collaborate or make decisions; instead, most of the power was held by one or two leaders. In these networks, stakeholders were not actively encouraged to work together and solve problems. As a result, there was little opportunity for knowledge sharing or capacity building.

The information broker

All the networks we studied had individuals who served as information brokers. This leadership role consisted of monitoring information flow within the network and ensuring that relevant information found its way to the appropriate individuals and work teams. The information broker created ways to enhance information distribution so that all stakeholders were informed when necessary and were able to participate in decision making without suffering from information overload. The information broker also tended to have considerable expertise related to the work of the network (eg curriculum development and facility management) and often drew on this expertise as one way of offering stakeholders new knowledge and information.

The boundary spanner

While we found that many of the leadership roles in networks were internally focused, our research also suggested the need for a leader to link the network with the external environment. The boundary spanner buffered the network by dealing with outside constituents, shielding the network from external ‘noise’ in the policy environment and by monitoring change in the external environment (eg new policies and regulations). Lastly, this leader scanned the environment for new network opportunities, funding sources, technologies and innovations that would help the network conduct its work more effectively.

Conclusion

These studies do seem collectively to estimate the elements of a convincing operational paradigm for effective learning networks. The deduction, then, would be that there exists a clear and causal progression from initial hypothesis about what effective networks would do and how they would be structured, through their establishment and facilitation, to their current success. In short, it might be tempting in retrospect to assert that we knew the answer to good NLC practice from the beginning And also that the key features, social practices and leadership roles which are a proven success might have been prescribed to aspiring learning communities as a panacea for all their education and organisational ills.

That said, however, there is a very important sense in which the very fact of being in an NLC, presents members with an experience of learning that would seem to oppose any notion of causal organisation. Networked Learning Communities generate a vast range of contradictory positions and experiences which construct their participants in creative and fluid modes: reform networks seem to provide their participants with opportunities to create knowledge as well as to consume it. They are decidedly collaborative, sometimes causing tension in the beginning and as new participants join, as they are inexperienced in working with others. These networks knew no geographical boundaries, yet held a vision of the possible that excited the participants and kept many coming to their various functions, sometimes over years. Teachers in particular were excited about being in a loose organisation that was not only flexible, but respectful of their work and their knowledge. And lastly, participants stated that they had never been included in a variety of structures that called upon them sometimes to lead, sometimes to be in conversation with their superiors and sometimes to learn across role groups.

So, the strength of network organisation is its fluidity and creativity, that is, its difference from traditional understandings of organisation. But what is key to understanding the unique learning culture in collaborative organisations is that this fluidity and creativity are necessarily regulated by facilitating structures and processes that are themselves loose enough to change and modify as required. Networks can be organised around all kinds of purposes. They could start with a huge idea (creating democratic schools) or a smaller idea (creating a university partnership with teachers and principals). The operative way of working in the study was collaborative. This meant that many opportunities needed to be organised so that disparate people – not used to being in the same group – could build trust, learn how to communicate with one another and learn from each other. Activities and relationships that developed over time eventually became the way these networks worked. Brokering relationships, activities and structures became the operating mode.

Although we can begin to see an essential structure emerging – one defined by activities and relationships that good networks find themselves doing – it is important to note that good networking practice has grown out of the disparate experiences and intentions of participants, refracted through many contradictory and complementary activities. In fact, there is almost a sense in which learning about how to operate creatively and flexibly in learning networks must be to do with the extraordinarily complex process of experiencing and resolving productive tensions which come from a lack of organised structure. A set of tensions characterised all the networks, and it was the negotiation of how these tensions were handled that appeared to predict ongoing success or failure.

- *Meaningful purposes and compelling activities*
  There was constant struggle to hold on to an ideal or a set of principles even as participants wanted solutions to their current problems.
- *Inside knowledge and outside knowledge*
  There seemed to be a constant tension between spending time on immediate needs versus problems of a more abstract nature.
- *Centralisation or decentralisation*
  Here the challenge seemed to be the constant negotiation of who was running the network. When it was kept broad and decentralised everyone had a voice, yet sometimes networks needed a push to reach higher than the participants' daily experience.
- *Inclusivity or exclusivity of membership*
  All the networks had to decide how large they would be, who the participants would be, how they would socialise newcomers.

The combined analysis represented in this paper suggests that although it is important for effective networks to preserve a sense of fluidity and flexibility, creativity and freedom, their success lies in the way that, as part of a commitment to the eventual deduction of organisation for learning, they can recognise and exploit positively the creative tensions such a looseness entails. There can be no doubt that in particular areas of networked activity, the creation of new leadership opportunities for example, there must be conscious and designed change for effective improvement. Overall, however, their composite thinking asserts that the predominant mode of learning within effective networks is affected by a kind of organisational unconscious: network structure and process has a sheen of coherence which, whilst illusory, is born of and constituted by the multiple, diverse and productive tensions that are integral to operational creativity.

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Collaboration and community

Developing professional learning communities: Messages for learning networks

Louise Stoll

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What are professional learning communities?

Despite different shades of interpretation in different national contexts, there is broad international consensus that the term 'professional learning community' suggests a group of people sharing and critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning-oriented, growth-promoting way, and operating as a collective enterprise. In many ways, this definition could be equally applied to learning networks, although some writers argue that networks engage in activities that can't be undertaken by one organisation alone. Professional learning communities and learning networks rest on similar assumptions about how staff in schools learn and change their practice: that teaching is complex, so they need to keep learning throughout their career; that a great deal of untapped knowledge exists in schools, that many challenges staff face are local challenges and need to be addressed 'on the ground'; and that staff improve by analysing, evaluating and experimenting with their practice with peers.

While various characteristics of professional learning communities have been identified, they can broadly be summarised under five headings.

- shared values and vision that focus on improving learning and teaching
- collective responsibility for the learning of all pupils
- reflective professional inquiry to deepen practice
- collaboration and teamwork
- group and collective learning, as well as individual learning

What is their impact?

Professional learning communities are a means to an end: the goal is not to be a professional learning community. The ultimate outcome of professional learning communities has to be experienced by pupils, even though there is an intermediate outcome in terms of the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of the professionals in the school's community. We are exploring impact on pupils' progress, but the evidence also shows that being part of a professional learning community can have a positive impact on teachers' work lives, their learning and improvement in practice, as well as improvement of the school as an organisation .

How do you develop professional learning communities?

Creating and developing professional learning communities appears to depend on a number of ingredients: opportunities provided by a range of learning experiences; important human and social resources; and supportive structural resources.

Providing learning opportunities

In professional learning communities, attention is paid to ensuring that there are opportunities for all staff to get involved in a wide range of formal and informal learning experiences, to be able to develop new ideas that will meet the needs of their pupils, and to try out, tinker with and refine practices both alone and with peers. Everything is considered an opportunity to learn. Promoting 'inquiry-mindedness', a questioning, self-evaluative and evidence-informed orientation to practice, is a key means of learning. Networking with colleagues in other schools provides further access to new ideas. There is also a focus on embedding all the new knowledge created and acquired through these learning opportunities so that they become a regular and comfortable part of people's repertoire of learning and teaching strategies.

Harnessing human and social resources

The human side of bringing about any change or development is extremely important. Engaging in learning can be risky. It's not easy for people to open themselves up to participate in activities such as mutual enquiry, classroom observation and feedback, mentoring partnerships and discussion about pedagogical issues and innovation unless they are confident it is safe to do this. Trust is therefore a key condition and has been found in one study to be considerably the strongest facilitator of professional community . Along with respect, mutual support, celebration of success, and willingness to take risks, trust is one of the norms of a collaborative culture.

Leadership is also important to promote the growth of professional learning communities. This is evidenced in headteachers' commitment as well as distributed leadership throughout the staff through joint action and leadership of smaller professional learning communities within the school. Leadership in professional learning communities is clearly not the domain of one individual or a small 'senior' group. The amount and quality of facilitation and external support for any serious school improvement effort can also be critical to both to support the change processes involved in developing and sustaining professional learning communities.

Ensuring supportive structures

Making use of structural resources can considerably help develop professional learning communities. These are often features within the control of the community's members, even if they may not seem like it. The one mentioned most often is time. Time is critical for any meaningful learning . This does not only mean timetabling and being able to cover teachers who go out of school to attend workshops, meetings or to visit other schools, but how schools plan and organise their timetables such that learning can occur within the school.

To facilitate teacher talk and exchange about professional issues, use of space within schools is also important . Opportunities for professional exchange appear to be facilitated by physical proximity (eg teachers in a department having neighbouring classrooms) and interdependent teaching roles (eg team teaching, joint lesson planning). Co-ordination and planning of professional activities also require sensitive handling so that staff have the necessary autonomy to make decisions about the learning and teaching of their own pupils while sharing collective responsibility for all pupils' learning.

The other structural resources enable better and deeper communication between professional learning communities' members and also enable greater participation in decision making. Use of meetings, staff briefings, newsletters, email communication, informal discussions and other communication mechanisms, therefore, all need careful thought in professional learning communities. Maintaining communication within large schools can be a particular challenge. This is one reason that it is often easier to develop professional learning communities in smaller schools.

Conclusion

Developing professional learning communities is a key component of capacity building . In many ways, learning networks are professional learning communities operating across a broader landscape. They seem to have a great deal in common with school-based professional learning communities and a number of similar goals. Learning networks also have added purposes: to enlarge individual schools' repertoire of choices and to move ideas and good practice around the system helping transform the whole system, not just individual schools, thus improving education for all pupils. This is collective responsibility and moral purpose writ large.

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Collaboration and community

Coaching in learning networks

Jan M Robertson

Coaching in learning networks

Jan M Robertson

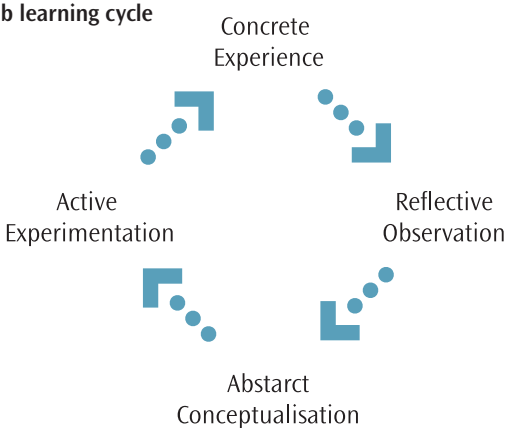
Learning networks, combined with formal coaching practices, which incorporate the principles of critical action research, may provide the right ingredients for radical and sustained change to occur in practitioners' practices: in schools and in school systems if the necessary skills for such professional ways of working have also been developed. The practice of coaching is based on the need to provide support and challenge in teacher development. It incorporates beliefs in practitioners-as-learners practitioners-as-knowers – the validation of practitioners as theory makers. It recognises the importance of operating at the interface of theory and practice and a desire to alter the traditional relationships between professionals and between institutions. The coaching process should be reciprocal and dynamic, meeting practitioners' individual and changing needs.

Professional learning

New professional practices are necessary for the development of learning communities that will lead to radical, transformative practices in schools. Rather than leave goal setting, peer observation and feedback to individual initiative and to chance, as research indicates it most often is (Robertson, 1997, Tomlinson, 1999), networked learning can be enhanced by establishing and supporting formal coaching relationships between practitioners.

A useful framework for exploring successful transformation at the individual and at the school level is Kolb's (1984) adult learning theory. Learning networks on their own may not provide practitioners with all four aspects of this adult learning process. Peer coaching provides a cohesive, constructivist methodology for continuing professional development.

Figure 1: Kolb learning cycle



Kolb, 1984

Each of these phases has essential elements for new learning and changes in practice to occur.

Experiencing

The daily roles, tasks and experiences of practitioners provide opportunities for effective learning to occur. This type of learning is more likely to enhance intellectual independence and self-direction in the professional development process. Drawing on these experiences and building on prior experiences and knowledge assists practitioners with the construction of new learning.

Reflecting

Reflection on previous actions will help to bring practitioners to a state of openness in which they are prepared to seek out new strategies and behaviours. There are times when practitioners' attitudes and values need to be challenged before they will be open to changing the ways in which they work, and there are other times when new experiences will initiate a change of values and beliefs and therefore future actions. The skills of coaching are necessary prerequisites for practitioners to be able to develop effective strategies to ensure such reflective questioning occurs, both in individual and group situations.

Conceptualising

The process of linking of theory and practice is important for practitioners to be able to formulate new concepts about their practice. These new concepts often need to come from outside the school or learning community to provide challenges to previous ways of knowing and thinking about learning and teaching. Learning networks can play a very important role in this phase of the learning process if practitioners are challenged to reflect critically and think about their work. The skills of coaching create opportunities for effective dialogue to occur.

Experimenting

After abstract conceptualisation and visualising new ways of working, practitioners are more likely to be ready to try new experiences and feel confident to experiment actively with different concepts and ideas. This experimentation with new ideas would then be based on the learning gained from critical reflection on previous experiences. Schön (1983) called this reflection-in-action.

'It is this whole process of reflection-in-action which is central to the "art" by which practitioners sometimes deal with situations of uncertainty, instability, uniqueness, and value conflicts.' (p 50)

Coaching assists practitioners to be reflective in action, on action and for future action, which results in a knowledge of practice, which is essential in a complex environment that characterises education today.

Crossing borders

Reciprocal coaching, involving shadowing in different education contexts, requires learners to cross over professionally formed 'borders' to view others' ways of working (Giroux, 1992). Access to others' work in education is often limited and' boundary breaking leadership' is required to create access across boundaries between practitioners and students, between schools and other organisations in the community, between cultures, between nations, between theory and practice, between different stakeholders in education (Robertson & Webber, 2002). The greater the amount of trust, the greater the transfer of knowledge across borders. The close individual relationships established through coaching will increase the amount of trust developed in the learning network as a whole.

Learning networks are effective vehicles for creating opportunities for border crossing over domains of learning but coaching is also necessary to assist practitioners to recognise the gap between their espoused theories (from co-constructed knowledge) to their new theories in action.

'Coaching bridges the gap between aspiration and achievement…since coaching is about change, it will support high performance through the process of change.'

Tomlinson, 2002, p 1188

Skills are essential to the coaching process, because it is the use of these skills that will assist practitioners to create new ways of learning with their professional colleagues.

Coaching skills are the passports

Practitioners' interactions with their colleagues become more in-depth as they develop the skills to work effectively on critical reflection in practice. In this way coaching will enhance the work of the network.

'The key to success of professional learning communities is seen as the increased efficacy within the community.'

Silins & Mulford, 2002, p 566

The skills of coaching need to be taught, practised and coached, perhaps with the assistance of an outside facilitator. The skills for effective coaching include:

- self-assessment
- goal setting
- developing action plans
- setting time frames
- observing and describing practice
- active listening
- reflective questioning

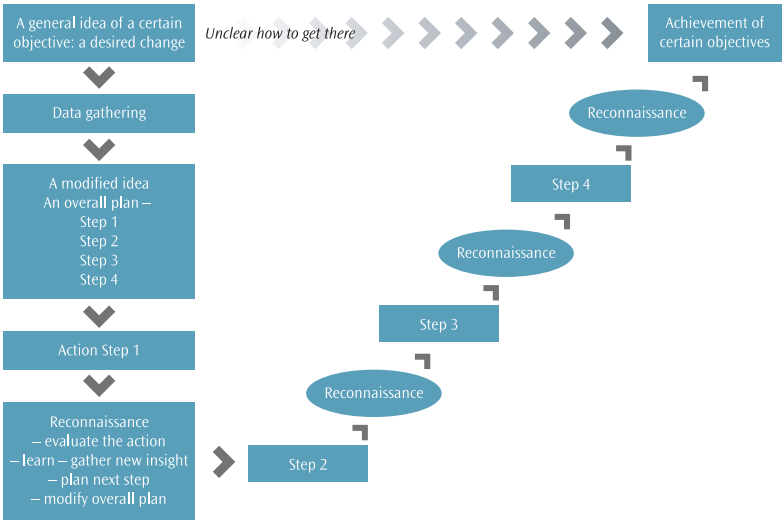
- giving descriptive and evaluative feedback
- critically reflecting on practice
- a knowledge of the action research and change process

When there is regular coaching, practitioners move beyond conversations and simple day-to-day problem solving into cycles of action research and dialogue as they work towards their individual and school goals.

From networks and coaching to action researchers

Practitioners will not necessarily set out to undertake 'action research' – cycles of action informed by research on those actions. Their systematic processes and action plans will evolve naturally over time as they work towards their goals, supported by the regular meetings of the learning network and their coaches.

Figure 2: The action research process



Robertson, 2004

The continuing processes of action research can be fostered by allowing practitioners time to reflect upon the goals they are setting in the network. Practitioners develop an initial individual plan, of which the first step is usually more data gathering in their classrooms or schools. Practitioners carry out their first action(s), with or without the observation and feedback from their coach, and then reflect on the outcomes of the action and the necessary directions to take from this stage. They evaluate, they learn from their actions, they plan the next step and then they modify their overall plans. The practitioners then carry out their next action and go through cycles of action steps and reconnaissance before arriving at the desired outcome. The coach provides descriptive and evaluative feedback at stages throughout the process. Networks are able to provide opportunities for critical reflection through multiple perspectives around pedagogy and learning.

The collaborative nature of any coaching programme is a key feature in leading educators into action research processes. The 'conscience' type effect of coaching in the learning network will encourage and support practitioners as they move systematically towards their goals. Coaching will assist practitioners to move from the 'ideas generation' within the network to the change that is needed at the individual level of implementation for school-wide and system-wide transformation to occur.

In summary

Learning networks provide a structure for professional autonomy and leadership. This is paramount for the development of the profession and for the recognition of the importance of professional knowledge. However, it is equally important that we do not just continue to reinvent the status quo and homogeneity in education – and that we are able to be innovative and transformative in our work. Learning networks provide an important vehicle for the co-construction and the transfer of knowledge. Changes in individuals' practices may be, therefore, where the focus needs to lie. Coaching skills and practices will not only enhance the dialogue in learning networks, but coaching will also support and challenge practitioners to change systems, policies and practices back in their own context.

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Collaboration and community

Some insights on shared leadership and communities of practice

Joseph Murphy

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Background information

The context for learning communities and shared leadership is underpinned by three major changes currently underway in education:

- attempts to redesign the way that schools are organised
- analyses of the dysfunctionalities of the traditional hierarchical structure in schools
- investigations of post-industrial forms that privilege collective conceptions of leadership

Distributed leadership is also nourished by a revolution in our understanding of leadership both in the broad conception of the construct and new knowledge about the skills and performances required of those in formal leadership positions. Meanwhile, communities of practice are being sustained by reform initiatives that shift the centre of gravity in school reform from centralisation and a nearly exclusive focus on government control to a more balanced portfolio that includes professionalisation and decentralisation.

Shared leadership and teacher professionalism

Shared leadership is powered by an integrated set of assumptions that highlight a specific logic of benefits. Teacher leadership is defined by a tightly linked theory in action. That is, when the engine that fuels learning communities is engaged, certain consequences are expected to follow. Specifically, shared leadership works by strengthening the professional dimensions of teaching, both for individual educators and for teaching as an occupation. Teacher leadership is thus about empowering teachers, increasing professional status and nurturing local autonomy and control. Empowerment and ownership, it is argued, capture important ends by positively influencing the commitment, efficacy and motivation of teachers. These bridging variables are linked to improvements in the ways schools operate and to conditions in classrooms that are, in turn, associated with enhanced student learning.

Expertise is the DNA of shared leadership and communities of practice

Expertise, as opposed to authority and position, provides the influence that permits teachers to function as leaders. And let us be clear, the expertise to which we refer is success in educating pupils. Thus leadership for learning networks is grounded in classrooms. Effective teaching is a prelude to leadership.

The headteacher plays a central role in making networks and distributed leadership come to life

While at first glance it may seem a bit paradoxical, evidence indicates that the headteacher occupies the critical position in ensuring that teacher leadership takes root and flourishes in schools. The robustness and viability of distributed leadership is dependent on the support and direction of the headteacher.

Professional development provides the most significant source of nourishment for teacher leadership

Professional development is the central link between policy and practice. In the area of teacher leadership in particular, because leading an organisation and groups of adults is different from teaching a class, providing teachers with the support to acquire new skill sets is a key component in all efforts to deepen leadership in schools. As Collinson and Sherrill (1997) assert: *'If we want teacher leaders, then we must work toward providing contexts that encourage learning.'*

Learning communities are not ends in themselves

While we have been arguing that fixing leadership solely to formal roles in schools is no longer an appropriate model, it is also important to remind ourselves that altering leadership structures provides no guarantee that leadership will be strengthened in schools. As we have learned from every area of school reform, including classroom change, changing organisational structures does not predict school performance. As much attention needs to be devoted to the content of shared leadership as to the form it assumes.

Professional cultures and organisational arrangements provide potent barriers to the development of teacher leadership and communities of practice

School social conditions and school contexts exert a dramatic influence on conceptions of distributed leadership. Characteristics of the school organisation such as structure, support, and culture are significant variables in the networked learning equation. The way schools are organised often acts to prevent experimentation, to lock in the status quo. More specifically, the culture and organisation of many schools does not readily nurture enquiry and collaboration. As Crowther and his colleagues (2002) sum up, *'environments that support and nurture teacher leadership are not endemic to many schools'* (p vii) and Little (1987) reminds us, symbols, norms, conventions, and *'tenacious habits of mind and deed make the achievement of strong collegial relations a remarkable accomplishment: not the rule but the rare, often fragile exception.'* (p 493)

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National College for School Leadership
Networked Learning Group
Derwent House
Cranfield University Technology Park
University Way
Cranfield
Bedfordshire MK43 0AZ

T: 08707 870 370
F: 0115 872 2401
E: nlc@ncsl.org.uk
W: www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

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