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

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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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