Networks as a force for change

Why networks and why now?

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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.

References

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