

# Network building

## A review of the formation stage of networks in the Networked Learning Communities programme

### Executive summary

*“Before you begin your journey just remember – you may have a map and a little extra money but destinations change, some guides are better than others and sometimes it takes longer to get there. Give yourself time!”*  
(Co-leader, September 2003)

Hadfield, M, Kubiak, C, Noden, C & O’Leary, D, 2005, *The Networked Learning Communities: Year One Review*, National College for School Leadership (NCSL), Networked Learning Group.

## Background

Between October 2003 and May 2004, 76 of the first 84 networks on the Networked Learning Communities programme reviewed their first year of operation as NLCs. Primarily designed as a learning exercise for the networks, this review consisted of the following activities:

- a review of progress made compared to the plans in the original submission to become an NLC, including identifying those activities which have gone ahead, been postponed or stopped.
- identification of major achievements and obstacles.
- drawing a chart of the network (a 'network-o-gramme').
- a review of the pupil learning focus identified by each network.

(A description of the method and the review tool are contained in appendices one and two of the full report respectively).

This report draws mostly from the reported year one achievements and from the learning focus data. It is divided into two sections. In the first section, three areas of network achievements are discussed, covering pupil, adult and leadership levels of learning. In the second section the key issues facing the networks at the end of year one and their plans for year two are described.

## Main findings

### Progress in the three main areas of learning

#### Pupil learning

At the end of year one there was, unsurprisingly, limited systematic reporting of evidence of network-wide impact on pupil learning. This reflects the relative youth of the networks and also the fact that in their first year they tended to place emphasis on building capacity and cohesion at school and network level. There was far greater reported impact on adult learning (see below). The most widespread areas of activity under pupil learning were:

- A re-negotiation of the pupil learning focuses to create unity, direction and momentum within a network. To a major degree this was a result of the work of the team of network facilitators. This re-negotiation of pupil learning focus resulted in more focused enquiry processes and improved the connections between different strands of activity in each network.
- Pupil participation and pupil voice activities. These activities centred largely around including young people in their own learning, providing them with opportunities to feed back to teachers and giving pupils opportunities to be activists in the network (for example as pupil researchers and members of network and school councils). Networks facilitated this by creating a range of different activities (e.g. pupil voice conferences and inter-visitations) and reported the breaking down of school-to-school boundaries as a benefit of these pupil interactions.

## Adult learning

Adult learning activities were the predominant network activity in year one and often defined the structure and shape of NLCs. NLCs generally invested a high level of resources into bringing practitioners together.

- NLCs generally acknowledged the need to lay foundations for networking CPD, especially by establishing trusting relationships and a shared vision for the network.
- The commonest processes and structures used to establish adult learning were conferences (and other one-off events), communication & knowledge sharing, and enquiry & research.
- One-off launch events and conferences were very effective if they were appropriately focused and followed up afterwards; otherwise, they had little impact beyond the short-term.
- Early reports of collaboration showed that there was a higher level of satisfaction and impact when events had high participation by local teachers from across the network and were subject or theme specific.
- The requirement for NLCs to undertake enquiry resulted in a high level of activity in this area, most commonly at school-to-school or network level. The data however, indicated limited dissemination of learning or transfer of practice and some difficulty in establishing meaningful and fruitful partnerships with Higher Education Institutions.

## Leadership learning

- NLCs in their early stages encourage the distribution of leadership via an expansion of teachers' roles. In particular this was often reported as giving some responsibility for leading school improvement to teacher-researchers.
- Understandings of leadership are often built through leadership learning groups, training opportunities and coaching or mentoring structures.
- Distributed leadership needs the support of network structures, leadership groups and supportive school conditions. NLCs may need to invest in the development of leadership skills to ensure that the early momentum of the networks is maintained and capitalised on in future years. Investing energy and skill in a small number of leaders is a risky strategy, as leadership change or burn-out will then have huge impact.

## The main issues facing leaders in the development of networks

- Networks need nurturing and developing in different ways, some of which can appear contradictory or in tension with each other. For example, NLC growth needs centralised support from headteachers but also a de-centralised layer of empowered teachers to take the work forward.
- NLCs often exist at the intersection of multiple networks. The role of the leader is often to thread and weave these networks into a cohesive plan that maintains its focus on improving pupil learning.
- Without structure teachers will tend not to learn together. This structure will often include facilitated, formally supported and resourced space for teachers to regularly meet together.
- Growth of NLCs in year one is often described as a move from often previously existing 'networking' into 'networked learning' – ie the formalisation and structuring of often pre-existing networking activity.

## The key areas of planned development in year two

NLCs reported their plans for year 2, most of which centred around growing and formalising the structures for school-to-school activity, including:

- a rapid expansion of school-to-school and network-to-network activity.
- increased development of learning infrastructures (release time, opportunities for collaboration) to bring teachers together at the school-to-school and network-wide level.
- improved internal facilitation, particularly the leadership of enquiry and enhanced network strategic development by greater inclusion of headteachers.
- enhanced resourcing of network activity (particularly around administration and supply cover).
- greater emphasis on network-to-network activity, particularly inter-visitations between networks and joint enquiry with other networks.