

[www.ncsl.org.uk](http://www.ncsl.org.uk)

# Learning from learning networks



*“Learning networks aim to be collaborative, to support learning at all levels, to promote practitioner enquiry, engage with theory and research, develop approaches to continuing professional development, and to draw theory from enquiry into practice.”*

Alis Oancea & John Furlong

# Learning from learning networks

The Networked Learning Communities programme makes extensive use of network enquiry and evidence. It also has research strands, both internal to the programme and externally commissioned. It has a three year external evaluation which also feeds into the emergent learning. Combining these fields of knowledge provides a unique evidence-base from which to draw out some wider learning themes<sup>1</sup>.

In short, we have learned some things about the disciplines of effective school-to-school networks. As a starting-point, a selection of these themes are listed below.

**The first set** comprises findings that the evidence-base on networks had prepared us to expect, and which the programme appears further to have validated. However, they seem well worth listing as a foundation for the work of others, as we have also learnt much that textures understanding now in terms of 'how to do' knowledge<sup>2</sup>.

These are things that we would say to others: "If you are planning to design a network, start here – and we could help you to plan or to connect with some good ways to do them."

**The second set** contains learning themes that have emerged during or from the work, and which may well be of wider interest to the education system. They are, of course, generalisations from across the programme, rather than characteristics that will necessarily be present in all cases, but these statements could be substantiated from the programme's research activity and evidence.

**The third set** contains 'problematicals' or hypotheses.

## Previous learning

The NLC programme, and the network design features, drew from best available knowledge worldwide – from international sites of practice, from theory, from previous policy initiatives and their evaluations, from prior research<sup>3</sup> and from face-to-face seminar exchanges with some of the world's leading figures in the field<sup>4</sup>. In accumulating this body of evidence, certain themes recurred or became apparent 'truths'. The six below were amongst these, and would stand out also as significant findings from the NLC programme:

- 1 Voluntarism is an important feature of network success.**
- 2 Shared values and purposes – a compelling reason for working together – is central to making the network work.**
- 3 Effective learning networks build upon and invoke 'moral purpose' – they generate collective purpose around the success of all children.**
- 4 Networks expand access to good ideas and facilitate knowledge sharing between members.**
- 5 Like all organisational forms, network 'structures' need to be tended – networks require internal facilitation or leadership.**
- 6 External consultancy and critical friendship are important to the success of networks.**

<sup>1</sup> This leaflet is drawn from a longer paper entitled *Learning themes from the Networked Learning Communities programme*, which was first presented at the International Congress for School Effectiveness and Improvement, Barcelona, January 2005.

<sup>2</sup> For example, we knew and understood that 'networks unite around compelling purposes', but we now know much more about what this means in practice and how such shared purposes are best generated.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *International Perspectives*, Tony Bush and David Jackson, paper presented at the University Council for Educational Administration Annual Conference, Cincinnati, USA, November 2001; *Theoretical Perspectives Relevant to Networked Learning Communities*, Robert McCormick, NCSL/Open University, 2002; *Review of Networked Learning Communities*, Kerr *et al*, NFER, May 2003; and *Learning the Lessons: How past policy initiatives can help practitioners in Networked Learning Communities*, Bentley *et al*, June 2002.

<sup>4</sup> Available from NCSL: International Think Tank notes, Nottingham, October 2002; International Think Tank notes, Rotterdam January 2004; International Seminar notes, San Diego, April 2004.

## Emerging learning themes

The 15 assertions below are ones that we feel are supported by findings generated within the NLC programme – from research (internal and external to the programme), evaluative activities, network reviews, programme-wide enquiries and facilitator observations. Inevitably, the strength of the evidence base varies, but the NLC programme could offer evidential support.

- 1 **A shared evidence-informed classroom learning focus unites networks.** However, ‘purchase’ at the classroom level requires finer translation into a discreet aspect of pedagogy housed in content.
- 2 **‘Co-leadership’ of networks has proved to be a highly successful model.**
- 3 **Learning networks spread leadership influence,** distribute leadership and liberate new ‘types’ of leaders.
- 4 **Trust is an important issue for networks, but it is as much an outcome of networked learning as it is a precondition.** Joint work activities build trust relationships.
- 5 **NLCs have drawn rigour from working to an explicit model of learning** – a commonly held mental model to inform effective learning design.
- 6 **In organisational networks, new ways of working together emerge with difficulty** and at high early ‘transaction cost’ – because the new network works ‘against the historical grain’.
- 7 **Networks require a structural architecture** built around collaborative learning functions to succeed as ‘learning networks’. (We are beginning to understand what this looks like in practice.)
- 8 **Networks create new ‘units of engagement’** – particularly with regard to new ways of working with local authorities and other external agencies.
- 9 **Learning networks can surface the reciprocity and generosity which is at the heart of a healthy collaborative culture** (and which we summarise as ‘collaboration’, but which loses much in translation).
- 10 **Network members understand their connection to the wider profession** – learning ‘on behalf of’ has been a major motivator for knowledge exchange and joint work activities.
- 11 **Some of the motivational force of networks emanates from members feeling ‘liberated from their school context’** and from the acquisition of a sense of ‘expanded professional identity’.
- 12 **The most significant areas of unplanned activity** have been in the fields of:
  - a. **Collaborative teacher enquiry and data analysis.**
  - b. **Pupil voice** (eg managing their own learning, taking increased responsibility, greater involvement in teaching and learning, learning to learn and metacognition, increased dialogue with staff).
- 13 **‘Ownership’, ‘reach’ and ‘will’ are more crucial** to network sustainability than are financial resources.
- 14 **School-to-school networks can and do provide effective capacity** and support for schools experiencing unusually high challenge situations, through differentiated peer evaluation and support strategies.
- 15 **Effective learning networks make a positive difference to pupils’ achievement.**

## Hypotheses and problematic issues

The statements below have the status of propositions – ‘findings’ bearing a warranty of practical experience. Some, like the second, are true, but are aspects that still require work to understand them better.

Others hint at issues for further study. Some are statements that ‘feel to be true’ but which, at the time of writing, are still without sufficient research evidence behind them, or for which the research evidence appears contradictory.

- 1 **Issues of causality and attribution are extremely problematic** when trying to assess the impact of networks.
- 2 **Whilst voluntarism is crucial, it can also be orchestrated.** It can be ‘brokered’ or mediated within early formulation processes.
- 3 **Networks expose the limits of traditional communication and involvement strategies.** Without a deep commitment to extensive and inclusive communication, widespread engagement cannot be achieved.
- 4 **The active involvement and advocacy of headteachers is crucial to success.** Networks in which some heads resist active commitment experience differential growth of network functions (and access for some staff and pupils is denied). However...
- 5 **...variation in the levels of commitment is an inherent and perhaps inevitable challenge** for learning networks.
- 6 **Networks require as much unlearning as new learning.** Those in positional roles enshrining institutional power – particularly heads – have the most challenging unlearning agendas for network success.
- 7 **‘Transfer of practice’ is far too naïve a concept to describe knowledge exchange processes in networks.** Collective problem-solving, joint work projects, collaborative enquiry – in short, a range of mutual learning and knowledge-creation activities – better describe the learning processes specific to network contexts.
- 8 Of the “*learning from, learning with and learning on behalf of...*” maxim originally adopted for NLCs, the ‘on behalf of’ dimension has proved to be the most far-reaching.
- 9 **The ideal size for a learning network is what makes sense for the member schools and for their context.** However, the optimum size appears to be between 5 and 12 schools. The larger the network, the more significant ‘size’ becomes as a distinctive challenge.
- 10 Networks have generated new tensions as well as created new possibilities in the relationship **between local authorities and schools. The challenges lie in the areas of ‘co-leadership’ and ‘co-design’.**
- 11 **Networks of schools appear to offer promising possibilities for the implementation of approaches to personalised learning and *Every Child Matters*.**
- 12 We know that ICT offers huge possibilities for knowledge-exchange, blended learning, collaborative processes and communication within networks. Despite some excellent examples of online innovation and architecture, **there are few examples of widespread and embedded use of ICT for network purposes.**
- 13 **We only have subjective data in the area of ‘cost-benefit analysis’.** The ‘opportunity cost’ and ‘transaction cost’ of network activity has to be offset by increased gain for children across the network’s schools. Network members believe this is the case, but evidence is emergent.
- 14 **We do not yet know whether networked learning communities are sustainable beyond the first three years** – or beyond a supported programme – although emerging evidence suggests that they are.

**National College for  
School Leadership**  
Triumph Road  
Nottingham NG8 1DH

T: 0870 001 1155  
F: 0115 872 2001  
E: [nlc@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:nlc@ncsl.org.uk)  
W: [www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc)

To order copies of this publication, please email [nlc@ncsl.org.uk](mailto:nlc@ncsl.org.uk) quoting reference Learning from or download from [www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc](http://www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc)

**Networked Learning Communities**

Learning from each other   Learning with each other   Learning on behalf of each other