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What are we **learning about...?**

LEA involvement in school networks

LEAs brokering school networks

Lancashire LEA

An illustrative example of what
LEA brokerage of school networks
looks like in practice.

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

LEAs brokering school networks

The case studies and accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of the ways in which LEAs are contributing to networking and collaboration between schools and within learning networks. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of how LEAs are going about the practice of 'brokerage' within their work, in bringing together, supporting and sustaining networks of schools.

“ Brokerage describes the act of arranging or negotiating relationships and partnerships. A broker is an intermediary or matchmaker engaged in the ‘acquisition of obligations’ from different parties in a purposeful relationship. ”

LEAs perform many roles and functions in relation to schools. However, we have identified five distinct brokerage roles through which LEAs appear to be able to add greatest value to networks of schools. We have characterised these five roles as 'brokerage' in order to distinguish these functions from traditional LEA roles and ways of working.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following individuals for their contribution to the generation and publication of these case studies and accounts of practice: Miranda Bell, Philippa Cordingley and the team at CUREE, Viv Clark, Graham Cotgreave, Paul Duckworth, Pete Dudley, Edwina Grant, Louise Hughes and Helen Williams.

**Matthew Horne, Demos and
Bill Rogers, Networked Learning Group, Editors**

Brokerage roles for LEAs

- 1 **Brokering network membership.**
- 2 **Brokering network relationships.**
- 3 **Brokering partnerships beyond the network.**
- 4 **Brokering the network's access to resources.**
- 5 **Brokering knowledge-exchange within and beyond networks.**

The case studies and accounts of practice in this series explore, in different ways, and with differing emphases, a range of brokerage roles and help to explain what LEA brokerage of school networks looks like in practice. □

Lancashire brokering school networks

Lancashire is a large county with 493 primary schools, 88 secondary schools, 26 nursery schools and 32 special schools. The relative isolation of many small rural schools argues for close collaboration through networks to mobilise the social and intellectual capital of a larger community of schools around common aspirations and challenges. Equally, urban and city schools serving diverse communities with high levels of transition, but economically static populations also have much more to gain through collaboration than through competition.

A recent survey of school networks in the county identified:

- 232 schools in formal networks
- 71 schools in 'small schools clusters' operating for a number of years
- 54 schools in Excellence Clusters
- 54 schools in six separate networked learning communities and over 50 schools in eight associate networks

How do we broker network membership, partnerships and relationships?

Lancashire LEA is passionate about promoting collaborative learning within and between its schools. Notwithstanding this, we believe that collaboration has to be between willing partners and is, therefore, best nurtured rather than forced. Inevitably this means that whilst we have a vision for the development of collaborative learning, in reality, we have to be creative in the way we respond to the needs of schools and their networks. In these circumstances, a range of different forms of facilitation, brokerage and support is called for.

There is both involvement and support from senior LEA officers, including the Director, as well as a vision within the LEA for collaborative learning which meant that support for school-based networks was written into our first LEA Education Development Plan. As a direct result of that, an LEA networked learning adviser role was identified through the EDP, which includes providing advice and support to networks.

The role of the networked learning adviser involves:

- Auditing all schools, via an adviser visit and questionnaire, to ascertain current networking activity and identify good practice.
- Acting as a consultant to our networked learning communities who have named the LEA as a partner.
- Providing information seminars to interested networks.
- Visits to network meetings.
- Facilitating a writing workshop where co-leaders from existing networks challenge and support the development of new NLC submissions.
- Providing email support for NLC submissions of which there was a huge take-up.

How do we broker knowledge-exchange?

Facilitating the sharing and dissemination of learning and of good practice is an LEA role which is not confined to school networks, but which has been accelerated and improved through the capacity and challenge provided by networks.

The activities of brokering knowledge-exchange include:

- An online community within Cumbria and Lancashire Education Online (CLEO) has been established to enable networks to share their work.
- There is LEA facilitation of a collaborative leadership learning group as part of an NCSL pilot project within the LEA.
- We are working with other LEAs as part of the NCSL LEArning Forum and LEArning Project to share our learning as we develop our practice with networks.

We recently launched a **good practice website** – a portal to other Lancashire websites – for sharing school ideas or innovations which will link among others, Learning Excellence Award winners, networked learning communities, teacher researchers, Leadership Incentive Grant collaboratives, Leading Edge collaboratives and specialist schools and colleges.

Lancashire brokering school networks

We hold a **networking conference** annually – out of which came the booklet 'The work of Lancashire's networks'. This shares collaborative working and celebrates success. We also host an annual small schools sharing good practice conference.

A **Learning Excellence Award** was introduced in 2003, so that schools can apply for a Lancashire accreditation mark for any aspect of their leadership and management. This includes their collaborative work with other schools – celebrating innovative practice.

A **networking newsletter** is also being introduced for all schools, to celebrate and advocate for collaborative working, together with information about the nature and advantages of networks and networking. Information is also provided in the Lancashire Governor newsletter and at conferences for school governors.

What have been the challenges of brokerage?

Time: finding time as an adviser to work with all interested networks of schools – this has been made easier by making networking an EDP priority and consequently providing time for the networked learning adviser to work with schools.

Workload: heavy demands on headteachers which make some schools reluctant to 'take-on' another initiative. This is usually overcome by our approach to this as facilitating schools working on their *own* learning focus and not trying to *force* schools together to work on *our* agenda.

Joining up: inevitably in an education authority so large, both in terms of geographical area, and numbers of advisers and seconded school leaders, ways have had to be found to inform, engage and mobilise staff in a joined-up response to network needs. This is not easy when the bulk of the service delivery is dependent on buy back by *individual* schools from within, and sometimes outside of, the county.

What have been our responses to these challenges?

Adviser and teacher adviser time has been allocated to each networked learning community as an external partner. Regular adviser updates are provided for colleagues – increasing our skills in supporting collaboratives and networked learning.

Schools can be flexible in the use of the Lancashire School Effectiveness Service, to allow an adviser to give input and advice to a network, not just to an individual school. In the same way, bespoke Continuous Professional Development (CPD) can be provided. Leadership and management training, provided by our School Leadership and Management Development Team, is available to networks. Courses use schools and networks as partners, to deliver and/or accredit training, as well as to mentor participants.

Other teams within the school effectiveness service are supporting collaborative work. Examples include; the assessment support team working with schools to share assessment data or benchmarking information, in order to encourage school improvement; curriculum specific networks; networks of leading practitioners in literacy, numeracy, foundation stage, ICT; networks for newly appointed headteachers, and so on.

In relation to teacher research, an innovative partnership (Teacher Training Agency funded) with Edge Hill College of Higher Education, is providing free accreditation for teacher research co-ordinators and research assistants and teachers within networks. In addition, invitational networks are being established to carry out enquiry and research into common themes, as part of the LEA's work under the Primary National Strategy Leadership Programme.

Advisers working in any collaborative initiative in the LEA meet together and are now linked via the school leadership and management development team.

What the LEA has learned: key drivers in brokerage

This is difficult to answer with any degree of certainty, but there are some factors that do stand out.

LEA brokerage – key factors:

- **The history of clustering and networking** within the LEA, and especially between small schools, certainly provided a strong experience base from which to learn and build.
- **The enthusiasm and commitment at the top level** within the LEA and making support for networking an EDP priority. These were important catalysts for subsequent decisions.
- **The EDP established the appointment of a named adviser** with specific responsibility and with time to visit, enthuse, encourage and support networks, and especially to begin to engage other LEA colleagues. Time was also made available for the network adviser to be fully involved in helping interested schools to prepare submissions, to be reflective and to develop their own ideas.
- **Given that the advisory service** is a bought service, it was also crucial that a connection was made between the needs of individual schools and networks and those of individual advisers and teams of advisers.

Having a dedicated School Leadership and Management Development Team within the school effectiveness service, to develop ideas such as NLCs, has been a success factor. The allocation of adviser and teacher-adviser time to networks for them to use flexibly, but to support their learning and further development, has certainly been another strong contributory factor, as has the LEAs willingness to respond to cluster requests for support and bespoke training.

It may be, that not all of our experience will be relevant to smaller county, urban and unitary LEAs. It is just possible, that our ability to offer other support, such as HEI accreditation, has been helped by our size as such a large LEA. At the same time, we are able to provide very specific local knowledge and support, because so many of our staff are locally based – a combination of economies of scale and local deployment.

What the LEA has learned: impact

We are collecting evidence of the impact of networking in a number of different ways.

LEA evidence-gathering strategies:

- **Our website** contains a directory of networks, which includes:
 - a network identification sheet that networks can complete and return to the LEA with details of their collaborative work
 - details of networked learning communities, their leaders and foci, promoting cross-network information and knowledge sharing
 - links to other networking initiatives, such as small schools, excellence clusters, specialist schools, leading edge schools etc
- **Conferences** with networked learning communities and other school clusters sharing their knowledge and learning with others.
- **A twice-yearly networking newsletter** to all schools sharing cameos of network activity and contact numbers of co-leaders.
- **Co-leaders forum** held termly with co-leaders from networks and facilitated by the LEA which includes gathering knowledge about impact and sharing this with other networks.
- **Involvement in the NCSL LEarning Forum and LEarning Project** and the exploration of our enquiry question on LEA involvement in school networks.

Lancashire brokering school networks

Next steps

The section of the EDP, within which network development figures, is entitled '*Developing schools' capacity to become more self-managing*'. Lancashire has not tried to introduce networking as a means of organising schools. It is school-led and organic in its nature. We see our job as facilitators, encouraging collaborative working, sharing good and best practice, assisting networks to develop their learning together, but we have not imposed network arrangements on schools. This has been part of its success. It is also part of the challenge.

We believe in networked learning and can see tremendous benefits of this in the schools that are actively involved, but the challenge now is to grow this quickly and move to a larger scale within the LEA, without imposing a centrally-driven structure on self managing schools – which may well fail. The national promise of entitlement for every primary school to be part of a learning network is a tremendous opportunity, but we believe we have to remember and apply what we have learned to date, to the way in which we broker and support future networked growth. □

Contact details:

LEA: Lancashire

Contact: Paul Duckworth
Lancashire Networked Learning Adviser

Address: Lancashire School Effectiveness Service
Area Education Office (North)
PO Box 606
White Cross Education Centre
Quarry Road
Lancaster
LA1 3SQ

Tel: 01524 585864

Fax: 01524 585854

Email: pduckworth.lcc@virgin.net

Website: www.lancsngfl.ac.uk/projects/gp_network

What are we learning about...?

The 'What are we learning about...?' series is designed to make public the learning that has emerged from NLCs in the last two years.

The first six titles in the series will focus on:

What are we learning about...?

- **LEA involvement in school networks**
- Establishing a network of schools
- The impact of school networks
- Professional development within school networks
- Leadership within school networks
- Sustaining a network of schools

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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



National College for School Leadership