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

Establishing a network of schools

Forging a networked learning community

Illustrative examples of what establishing a
network of schools looks like in practice.

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

Forging a networked learning community

The accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of the early phases of network development. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of the significant elements we have found to be evident when establishing a network of schools.

“There is no blueprint for an effective network. No one set of arrangements or one particular type of organisation is necessarily better than another. However, we do know about some things that seem to work.”

There are now many schools, both in the UK and internationally that are benefiting from working together as a network. From their experience, and from the range of research that has been undertaken in school networks, it is possible to identify the factors that successful networks have in common.

Four things effective networks do

- 1 *Design around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose and an appropriate form and structure.*
- 2 *Focus on pupil learning.*
- 3 *Create new opportunities for adult learning.*
- 4 *Plan and have dedicated leadership and management.*

Considering some of these factors in the process of beginning to plan for establishing a network will help to ensure that future development is built from the best of what is known from current thinking and practice. In other words, as Leadbetter (2004)¹ has described, it will assist in moving ‘from best practice to next practice’.

The accounts of practice in this series explore in different ways and with different emphases, these key elements of effective networks and in so doing they help to explain what establishing a network of schools looks like in practice. □

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¹ Leadbetter, C., 2004, Keynote address to the Leading Network of Schools Conference, Birmingham, October 2004

Forging a networked learning community

This account of practice looks at the experiences of one networked learning community over the first year of its existence and considers the issues involved in trying to forge a community of schools. It is anticipated that this account of the difficulties and problems experienced and the steps forward which have emerged, will be of interest to those who wish to understand some of the challenges in establishing a network of schools and to learn from others about solutions to real problems that networks may face.

Collaborative learning between schools: an idea whose time has come?

One of the manifestations of a belief in the transformative capacity of collaborative learning between schools was the government's investment in the Networked Learning Communities initiative, based on the proposition that *'schools seeking to become professional learning communities could achieve this more appropriately and more profoundly by working together interdependently in networks'* (NCSL, 2003). This is not to say that the idea of competition and choice as vehicles to raise educational standards has evaporated (Elkins & Elliott, 2004). Performance tables and choice between different types of schools remain part of the educational landscape, but these now co-exist with the idea of collegiality, federation, partnership and networking between schools. It is, in the words of Craig (2003), *'a delicate balancing act'*.

This account of practice seeks to identify some of the complexities and challenges of networking in any community. The Norfolk Do Different NLC has a number of characteristics that are distinctive, and working through them presents distinctive challenges. In the light of this, we explore the context of the establishment of the networked learning community, its history, structure and peculiarities.

Throughout the account, we address the practicalities of working as a network and draw upon data from participants in our own network and the perspectives of co-leaders from ten other networked learning communities who were consulted in our enquiry.

The nature of the Do Different network

The community encompasses 25 schools located across the county of Norfolk – 70 miles separate the most western school from the most eastern school. The community consists of infant and first schools, primary schools, middle schools and secondary schools. Some schools serve an urban catchment area, some a rural area. The desire to be included in the NLC programme was based on an action-research approach to innovative pedagogies. The Centre for Applied Education (CARE) at the University of East Anglia (UEA) was a partner from the outset. There was a wish among some key participants to continue collaborative working, but to extend the network across phases and further across the county. The starting point for the network was that the participants were interested in developing innovative ideas within their own schools and were willing to share their ideas and findings with others.

Three co-leaders were appointed, a headteacher of a middle school, a deputy headteacher of a high school and a senior lecturer from UEA. A consultant and a critical friend, both from UEA, were also involved. To summarise what was an evolving and somewhat uncertain process, it was agreed that schools would work on their own self-defined projects in the first year. There would be regular meetings of the co-leaders and the consultant, delegates would attend NLC conferences and there would be two community conferences, one at the start of the year and one at the end of the year.

The launch conference appeared to go well and the end of year conference was an exciting and stimulating event – probably the highlight of the activities of the network over the course of the year. There was a strong sense of engagement and mutual regard across the phases. However, in the period between the two conferences, some momentum was lost. Several schools were not represented at meetings, not all schools sent back returns from the levels of learning survey, and in some schools, there appeared to be a degree of uncertainty about who the learning leader was. We did not have an active and functioning headteachers' group and there had been some scepticism and anxiety about what had happened (and not happened) over the course of the year. □

Participants' reflections on the first year of being in a network

At the end of the first year of the life of the network, a number of participant teachers and headteachers were questioned, with the objective of gaining some sense of how they evaluated the impact of community involvement on their own and their schools' practices. The key issues are identified below.

1 The idea of networking

All participants saw the value of the idea of learning together and learning from each other. Those who had been active had enjoyed the experiences that the community had created for them.

“ At the meeting at CG, I got talking to one of their teachers who was doing mind-mapping and I've swapped phone numbers and I really want to try out some of her ideas. ”

“ It was great sharing ideas about how to get the best out of digital video editing. ”

These statements support, in value terms, the idea of sharing, as expressed by Hargreaves and Fullan (1998): 'Partnerships also strengthen people's capacity to learn and improve over time by opening them up to divergent viewpoints and honest feedback'. All participants supported the idea of networking. One teacher saw networking as a means of teachers regaining some ownership of the processes of teaching and learning.

“ For too long we've been told what to do and how to do it by 'them', whether 'them' is the government, Ofsted or LEA advisers. I want to learn from those who are in the classroom, day in, day out. ”

This is a statement by an 'activist', which reflects a growing wish for what Sachs (2003) describes as 'transformative professionalism': 'Being active means engaging with and responding to issues that relate directly or indirectly to education and schooling. It involves participation, collaboration and cooperation from within and outside the profession'. Overall, the idea of collaboration seemed much stronger than that of competition and there was little to suggest that schools were holding things back, or were reluctant to share their work and findings fully with other schools. This seemed to be one of the facets of networking that teachers particularly enjoyed.

2 Priorities: 'would like to do' and 'must do' activities

Elkins and Elliott (2004), among others, have set out the extent to which education in England has been controlled by central government. The problem is reconciling what education professionals would *like* to do against what they *have* to do, in a centrally directed, regulatory education system. One headteacher said:

“ Of course I support networking. But, when it comes to the crunch, can I find time for teachers to engage in something that is not immediately evident in terms of measurable results? We are involved in so many initiatives with tight accountability. These have to be prioritised and I'm afraid that good things like the networked learning community tend to go on to the back burner. ”

This central tension between prescription and inclination is reflected in other aspects of the current educational agenda. David Miliband, former Minister of State for School Standards, sees a future in which 'a mixture of clearly defined accountabilities can be combined with maximum local freedom' in which 'the ideal is to run the system tight and loose' (Reeves, 2003). At present, 'loose' ventures, like involvement in a networked learning community, appear to have a lower priority than 'tight' accountabilities.

3 Teacher autonomy: pros and cons

Some networked learning communities have pre-defined the focus of the networking, looking at, say, mathematics teaching at Key Stage 2. In Do Different NLC, participant schools were free to use action research to develop innovative approaches to any aspect of teaching and learning. The strength of Do Different NLC is its potential to generate a very wide range of activities from its 25 schools, the weakness is that it is up to individual schools to define the activities. The most active schools in the network have used their involvement in the community as a means of strengthening existing priorities and initiatives.

“ As your starting point, you've got to look for issues and interests that link the pre-occupations of the school and of individual members of staff. You've got to focus on existing activities. ”

4 Leadership and culture

Where levels of participation and activity among staff within schools are high, it is often because of the leadership of the head or a key member of the school leadership team:

“ The idea of activities afternoons came from our headteacher. She has taken the lead and has been active throughout in encouraging everyone to try out new ideas. ”

Where school leaders are less engaged, difficulties occur:

“ You need the head to take the lead and show tangible support for what you’re doing. I had that in my previous school with NASC. I’ve not got it here. ”

5 Logistical problems

The issues described so far, apply to any attempt to create a learning community, but in a community as dispersed as Do Different NLC, there are additional problems. All participants in our survey talk of the difficulty of attending meetings outside their own schools:

“ Whereas some NLCs had clearly been a fairly closely knit group and had worked together before formally forming a community, we did not all know each other. The geographical distance between Norwich and Kings Lynn has also been problematic in terms of liaison. ”

Mid-year, the decision was taken to divide the schools into three clusters, one cluster involving the secondary school and primaries in Kings’ Lynn, and primary and secondary clusters of schools that are more oriented towards Norwich. This has resulted in better attendance at meetings, but has not resolved the problem. There are different approaches to the issue of non-attendance. One NLC participant is very clear on what should happen:

“ There has to be a real commitment by heads, a much more formalised commitment by heads to meet up. The leaders need to have the courage to say to schools that they must attend meetings on designated days or you’re out of the community. It needs clear leadership, not a softly-softly approach. ”

Others are less dogmatic and are sympathetic to the difficulties of individual schools own priorities:

“ I think we’ve tried to avoid an audit or blame culture. It’s essential that being in the community is seen as a positive and enjoyable thing, not like another strategy directive or Ofsted experience. ” □

Findings from other networks

Given the overarching ethos and rationale of the NLC programme, it seemed sensible to explore the extent to which other networks might be encountering similar problems, and how they dealt with them.

We studied a range of large networks. In four instances, NLCs were a mixture of schools which had previously worked closely together. In two cases, the networks were substantively new, with very little previous experience of working together. In another case, over 25 schools spread over two different counties were involved. In the other eight networks, there was some degree of concern about the commitment of all schools to network activity. The scale of these problems was very different, and some delineation might be made here between ‘on the edge of things’ schools, and schools who were not attending meetings or responding to communications:

“ Not all schools are equally involved but we can work round that. ”

“ It’s a real problem, some schools are not involved, don’t come to meetings and don’t return questionnaires...not doing anything. This is a problem as there are some schools just outside who are keen to come in. ”

Findings from other networks

As in our network, there were differing views on what to do about the problem of 'sleeping' schools. In some cases, co-leaders seemed to accept that it was in the nature of things that some schools might be more proactive than others, and that activity might vary over the course of time, as circumstances permitted. Co-leaders were asked how the steering group handled the problem of 'sleeping' or 'on the edge' schools, and again, there were a range of responses:

“ At first we tried to perhaps be a bit dictatorial about it. But it doesn't really work and can be counter-productive. ”

“ Leaving the door open... keep sending the stuff... you've got to be understanding... if they've got Ofsted... ”

In terms of trying to forge closer links between network schools, and finding effective ways of communicating and working, in several cases larger networks had broken down their community into smaller clusters of schools, and in some cases designating some schools as lead schools:

“ Because we are so geographically dispersed, we work as four cluster groups, with four lead schools... In view of the distances involved, we get together at weekends. ”

All the networks we spoke to had steering groups as one of the key mechanisms for co-ordinating the activities of the community, but the existence of headteacher groups was much more patchy, and this was clearly a problematic area for larger networks given the difficulties of assembling over 20 headteachers at any one time. Appreciative enquiry approaches (Cooperrider *et al*, 1993), where teachers met to talk about things that they had done which they felt had worked well, termed in one case 'bring and brag' meetings, were felt to be good for morale and for creating a positive learning-focused climate in network meetings.

Maintaining the cohesion of the community was generally seen by most participants as a social and human relationship matter, rather than a purely administrative matter of meetings, bulletin boards and memos:

“ Yes, we're definitely much closer as a group now, it's different, now we talk about learning much more. We used to have meetings before, but it was much more a case of talking about management, this makes it more interesting. ”

The conversations with network co-leaders also explored the extent to which they believed that being in a network helped to develop an ethos of genuine collaboration and sharing between schools. As in other areas, there were different responses. In some networks, schools had worked together to help each other through Ofsted inspection, in others it was felt that some schools were takers rather than givers who regarded the network primarily as a way to get hold of extra funding for their school, without giving much thought as to how these funds might benefit the network as a whole.

“ To be honest, not all schools are genuinely interested in collaboration and the idea of networking and sharing things. One senior teacher said to me: 'All I'm concerned about is what goes on in this school and what's best for this school'. ”

“ It has been a big help when Ofsted have been in. Three schools in the network were Ofsted-ed last year and we helped each other through. ”

None of the co-leaders we spoke to regretted their involvement in the NLC initiative and even though not all networks were functioning perfectly, the activities which had taken place were felt to have created closer and more positive relations between the schools who had been actively involved. Even in networks which had encountered some difficulties, the benefits were felt to outweigh the problems. □

End note

In terms of trying to forge a learning community from what was a fairly disparate and dispersed group of schools prior to the launch of the network, two things in particular seem to be important factors in promoting the vitality of the network. Our feelings about these factors have been reinforced by the comments of participants from other networks.

First, the autonomy of teachers to choose which particular area of pedagogical innovation they wish to explore is essential to secure the commitment and enthusiasm of very busy professionals who have many other commitments which are necessary requirements rather than an optional extra part of their job (such as preparation for Ofsted inspection or SATs).

Second, the social cement of the network is based on personal, face-to-face contact, whether at workshops and seminars or school-to-school visits. These have consistently provided the high-spots of the network's activities. Although the network has its own website and newsletter, it would appear to us that not even the most sophisticated electronic portal can provide the same pleasure, interest and stimulus as the experience of teachers meeting together to talk about their research.

“ The best bits of the year have been when teachers have met to share ideas and experiences. The highlight for me was the end of year workshop. All the schools who fed back on their activities presented their work brilliantly and there was a really good feel to the afternoon, you just felt confident that they had all enjoyed being involved in the work, and sharing it with others. ”

In one sense, trying to forge a network of schools involved working against the grain. As Zhao and Frank (2003) argue, such activities are less likely to flourish when teachers are obliged to engage with a large number of other initiatives which are not optional or extra. Time, not money, emerged as the most influential barrier to teacher engagement in innovative approaches to subject pedagogy. Whatever problems have been encountered, all participants want to continue within the learning community and want to see it develop. We're only just beginning. We have achieved a great deal, but part of our learning has been a recognition that we have far to go. We rest our case on the continuing enthusiasm of the teachers we have surveyed. In spite of the problems we have described, this response by one of the teachers makes the work of our community seem worthwhile:

“ The community has given me opportunities I wouldn't have had otherwise. Where else could I have found out what is going on in infant schools and secondary schools and gone away with ideas I've shared with my colleagues? I don't know whether these ideas will change practice in my school. Life isn't like that. Often something is tucked away in your mind and at a later stage you remember it and it becomes a powerful catalyst for action. ” □

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