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

Establishing a network of schools

Network growth

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

Network growth

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. □

Acknowledgements

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**Darren Holmes and Louise Johns-Shepherd,
Networked Learning Group, Lead Developers**

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

Network growth

This account of practice draws directly upon data from research undertaken with networked learning communities. It will be of particular interest to those wishing to consider some of the factors that impact on the structure and progression of a school network.

The account looks at how networks in the Networked Learning Communities programme have grown and changed over time. It addresses, in particular, the attempts made by networks to meet the challenges they have faced, and how their response has led to the identification of five key activities which are characterised as being associated with the following stages of network development:

- 1 Courting
- 2 Aligning
- 3 Connecting
- 4 Embedding
- 5 Re-focusing

These activities are visited and re-visited over time, often taking place simultaneously, from the outset of establishing a network of schools to the later stages of development.

Growing a network of schools

In 1993 a small group of students from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology took on the might of a multi-million dollar industry. After a period of struggle, the Las Vegas Casinos had learnt how to detect and eliminate card-counting – a tactic in poker which reverses the odds and gives the individual the advantage over the house. Or at least they thought they had, until the MIT students pioneered and perfected a technique which made this all possible again through a process of collaboration between a number of players. For individuals, card-counting remained impossible, but for the ‘amphibians’ (as the students called themselves) all bets were off. With several players working in collaboration, they were able to generate the capacity to change the rules of the game and open up new possibilities. In many ways, this captures the challenge of establishing and maintaining a successful network.

What are the aspects of school life which require the amphibians approach and what are the challenges, tensions, and opportunities which will shape this process?

One challenge for network leaders is to determine which activities are best carried out in single schools and which will benefit from the capacity that can only be offered by a network.

Experience shows that this greater capacity can prove telling in areas as diverse as delivering effective CPD, reducing the administrative burden in schools, allowing for greater support and mentoring and offering a wider curriculum. In CPD, networks are often able to afford external expertise where individual schools are not, whilst they also enjoy the capacity to follow this up effectively with ‘learning walks’ to other schools, or in network-wide working groups. Similarly, a wider curriculum offer becomes much more attainable for schools which are able to make shared use of facilities or expertise within a network. Moreover, as Tom Bentley (2004)² suggests, networks can offer the scope and conditions which allow innovation to flourish in a way that is not always possible in individual schools. This is underlined by Wohlstetter et al (2004)³:

“A network ... is a group of organisations working together to solve problems or issues of mutual concern that are too large for any one organisation to handle on its own.”

However, successful and sustainable networks rarely just happen – they face challenges from the outset, and will inevitably experience turbulence along the way. In their early stages networks may struggle to define a shared agenda for collaboration, whilst others may have difficulty operationalising or embedding this agenda further down the line. Indeed, even the most mature networks are likely to encounter difficulties which test their resilience: losing a headteacher, facing an Ofsted inspection, or encountering a new opportunity may require the network to realign itself or reassess its short-term objectives. These attempts to meet existing challenges and respond to new ones are likely to lead to five key activities in networks which are visited and revisited over time – and which will often take place simultaneously. □

² Bentley, T, 2004, ‘Developing a network perspective’ in *What are we learning about... Establishing a network of schools?*, National College for School Leadership

³ Wohlstetter, P, Malloy, C, Chau, D, & Polhemus, J, 2004, ‘Improving schools through networks: A new approach to urban school reform’ in *What are we learning about... LEA involvement in school networks?*, National College for School Leadership

Five key activities in networks

Five key activities in networks

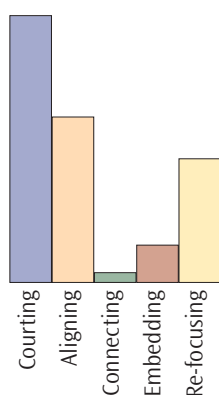
1 Courting	Approaching potential network partner schools, developing proposals for networked activity. Winning headteacher buy in through individual or group negotiation.
2 Aligning	Preparing plans for the network – creating a shared agenda and establishing objectives. Developing norms and protocols for collaboration between schools.
3 Connecting	Turning structured opportunities and clear foci into shared programmes of work, with teachers visiting other schools, collaborating through working groups, innovating and sharing their practice.
4 Embedding	Institutionalising network groups – a networked approach becomes the established way of addressing some issues.
5 Re-focusing	Re-energising 'stale' networks. Need for new partners identified. Some groups may be dissolved. A new focus for the network?

In different situations, one or more of these activities may well take on greater importance than the others, as the network adapts to the specific set of challenges that it faces at any one time. This may result from a natural process as the network matures, or take place due to external pressures (see fig 1).

Fig 1

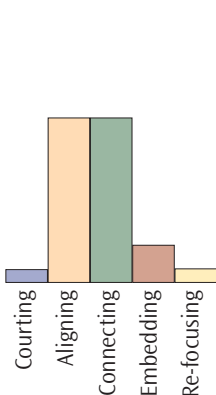
Early days

Priority on focusing network activity and drawing in new members.



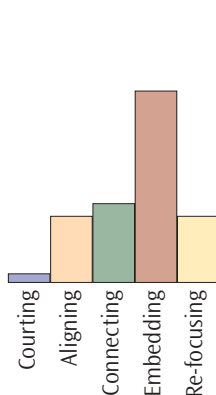
Emerging network

Priority of winning buy in from heads and providing opportunities for teachers to work together.



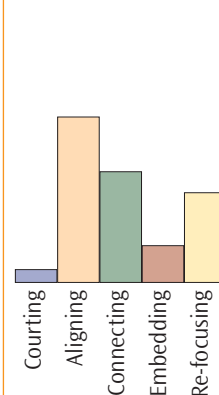
Mature

Network underway as successive cohorts of teachers move into network-wide activities.



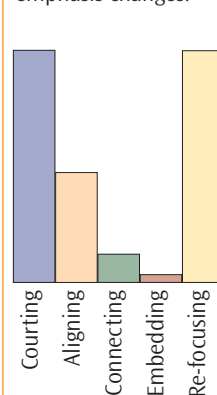
One school disengages

The network realigns itself to cope with the loss. Working groups may be reformed.



New opportunity for the network

The priorities of the network are reassessed. Efforts to embed work becomes less of a focus as its emphasis changes.



Kubiak & Bertram, 2004⁴

⁴Kubiak, C. & Bertram, J., 2004, 'Network Leaders' Perspectives on the growth of Networked Learning Communities', Paper presented to the British Educational Research Association Annual Conference, Manchester, September 2004

1 Courting

This is likely to take place in the very early stages of network life and will probably centre on a bid or submission to become part of a formal network. Potential network members may have had previous experience of collaboration (eg in an Education Action Zone, or through a Local Education Authority cluster), or they may be coming to work together for the first time. Either way, network leaders are likely to concentrate on getting people on board and the network underway.

Leaders work to draw resources and people in around a shared idea of what the network could achieve.

This involves...

- Searching among existing contacts for interested parties to invite to participate.
- Building consensus amongst school leaders around a compelling idea for the network.
- Putting initial proposals together.
- Securing commitment to the idea.

Whilst the idea of the network can be inspiring to some, it may seem a little abstract to others at this stage. The challenge is to begin to flesh out the idea of the network, so that it reflects the particular goals of the schools involved.

2 Aligning

This involves planning specifically how the network will achieve its goals in practice. Collaboration may be encouraged and facilitated through establishing some protocols or roles which can help to underpin schools' work together. Examples of this might be establishing regular planning teams and working groups, or appointing teachers to positions such as lead learners, or knowledge managers. The work of existing partnerships between member schools might also be brought in to the network, as part of an effort to avoid replicating work and wasting resources. Leaders are likely to work together to create specific plans which will help teachers collaborate effectively.

Aspects of planning for collaboration

- Achieving network-wide agreement for the core purpose of the network and its specific goals.
- Setting the parameters for collaboration eg what should the network be doing? How can this be achieved?
- Setting clear short-term objectives.
- Establishing working groups.
- Securing resources for network use.

The planning stage can be charged with emotion as broad visions of a network become specific plans and activities. This process can be helped by the trust built in previous partnerships, or hindered by resistance to change. The challenge is to balance maintaining consensus with making progress and taking decisions. Clearly, network leadership is crucial at this stage – and the shared or co-leadership model favoured by many networks is supportive of problem-solving.

Five key activities in networks

3 Connecting

This activity may be symbolised by an event such as a launch conference, or as the network swings into action and begins to implement some of the plans that have been laid out by network leaders and others. Teachers take on an important role as they engage in enquiry and share their practice with others in the network. Network leaders may need to 'let go' of the network a little at this stage, as they allow teachers the space to innovate. However, they are also likely to maintain a strategic role in terms of advocacy, communication and maintaining a facilitative environment for the work.

Dimensions of the strategic role of network leaders in connecting activity

- Modelling some of the processes of the network, such as visiting other schools or participating in group activities.
- Uniting the head teacher group around the networked learning purposes – and moving heads' session from meeting to workshops and seminars.
- Encouraging low-risk, appropriate challenge activities at the start, which will help to build trust within the network.
- Working towards some quick wins, which will help demonstrate the potential of the network.

One of the biggest challenges as the network begins to connect is to create a critical mass of enthusiasts to participate fully in the network. This often requires a balance of pushing people to get involved and allowing groups to emerge naturally.

4 Embedding

Whilst networks of schools may enjoy considerable success, they can also become reliant on particular individuals or sources of funding. Embedding the work of the network in day-to-day practice therefore represents an important step towards ensuring its sustainability over time. Leaders work towards this by building the capacity of teachers within their schools to take on greater leadership responsibility and by ensuring that the benefits of the network have reached and touched all members of staff.

Dimensions of capacity building in networks for embedding activity

- Commitment to a model of distributed leadership.
- Teacher-researchers running workshops based on their enquiries and helping develop their colleagues' skills in particular areas.
- Building norms of exchange and joint work by using visits to each other's schools, learning walks and joint CPD activities.
- Headteachers scanning across the network's activity and drawing practices into their school that they think will enhance pupil learning.

Often the challenge here is to ensure that the work of the network benefits more than those people involved in specific groups or activities. This can depend as much on the culture within a school and the advocacy of headteachers as it does on the links between them.

End note

5 Re-focusing

Any number of factors may require a network to re-focus its efforts: funding may dry up, new partners may be acquired, new challenges may emerge, or old ones may be dealt with. In order to inject fresh life into collaboration between schools, the network may need to revisit its original purposes and objectives. The role of network leaders and headteachers in this situation is important – although they may find that they are no longer the sole decision-makers.

The role of network leaders in re-focusing network activity

- Reflecting on and evaluating the previous work of the network – using data.
- Drawing on the knowledge of those who were involved in this.
- Expanding or altering the leadership teams to reflect new circumstances.
- Addressing fragmentation in the network and working towards establishing a new set of priorities.

One of the biggest challenges that comes with re-focusing a network is to avoid losing momentum. Establishing fresh objectives that will resonate with those already involved in the network is important. □

For the MIT students, collaboration was not an instant process – nor was it instantly successful. Getting to know each other and building mutual trust was a pre-cursor to success. Similarly, the students worked carefully over a sustained period to develop roles and protocols which would help them work together more effectively. Even as they put their plans into action in the casinos of Las Vegas, they became aware of certain practices that would need to be refined if they were to maximise their potential. This represents just part of the process that networks of schools are likely to go through as they aim to glean the best possible results from collaboration.

Each of the activities described above represents a way of ensuring that a network's efforts produce the highest possible leverage at any one time. With this aim in mind, network leaders will be required to shape and react to the network's development as circumstances change and network membership evolves. This may necessitate employing ever-changing combinations of *courting*, *aligning*, *connecting*, *embedding* and *re-focusing*. In this way, life in a network of schools may well prove to be messy and unpredictable, but with a toolkit of options available to teachers and network leaders, it should never be unrewarding. □

Contact details:

Contact: Duncan O'Leary,
Demos

Email: duncan.o'leary@demos.co.uk

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:

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- 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