NCSL
National College for
School Leadership

www.ncsl.org.uk

## What are we
# learning about...?

## Establishing a network of schools

# Developing
# a network
# learning focus

A development tool designed to explore the
processes of establishing a network of schools.

## Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other | learning with each other | learning on behalf of each other

## Acknowledgements

# Developing a network learning focus

**When establishing** a learning network which is designed to improve pupil learning, raise standards of achievement and enhance the curriculum that is offered to students, there is a need to identify a clear focus for pupil learning and for the learning of adults involved in a school network.
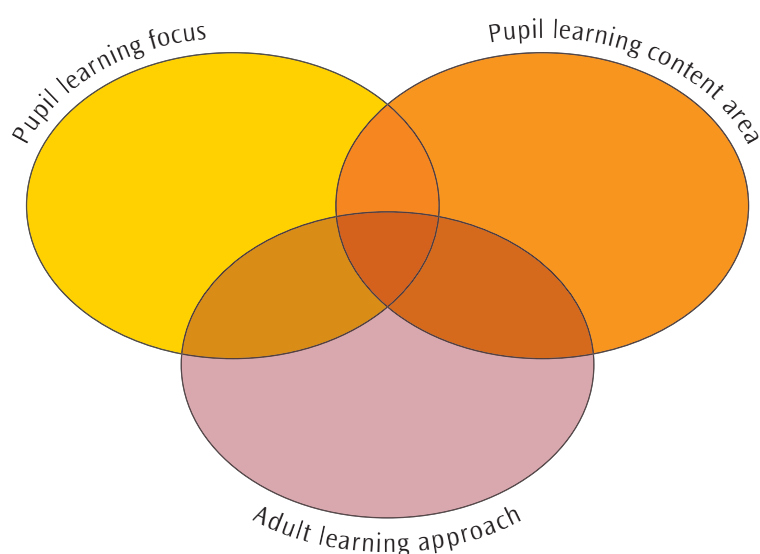


This development tool provides a practical way of defining a pupil learning focus and will help networks consider the possible learning processes which might underpin both pupil and adult learning within a network. The activity is drawn from *Sharpening your pupil learning focus* (NCSL, 2003)[1].

## What is a network learning focus?

The pupil learning focus needs to be the driving force at the heart of your network. It should connect and unify classroom work across a network. It needs a clear content area that is relevant to the needs of pupils and an identified approach through which your objectives can be reached. You should also consider how the adults in the network will learn together for the benefit of pupils.

Your network will want to ensure that the pupil learning focus grows from existing priorities and current data. This will make sure that the work of the network is aligned with the work that is ongoing in its schools. It may be that your network identifies a specific target group (such as

children at the point of transition between key stages) or it may be more appropriate for your network to have a focus which seeks to improve teaching and learning through:
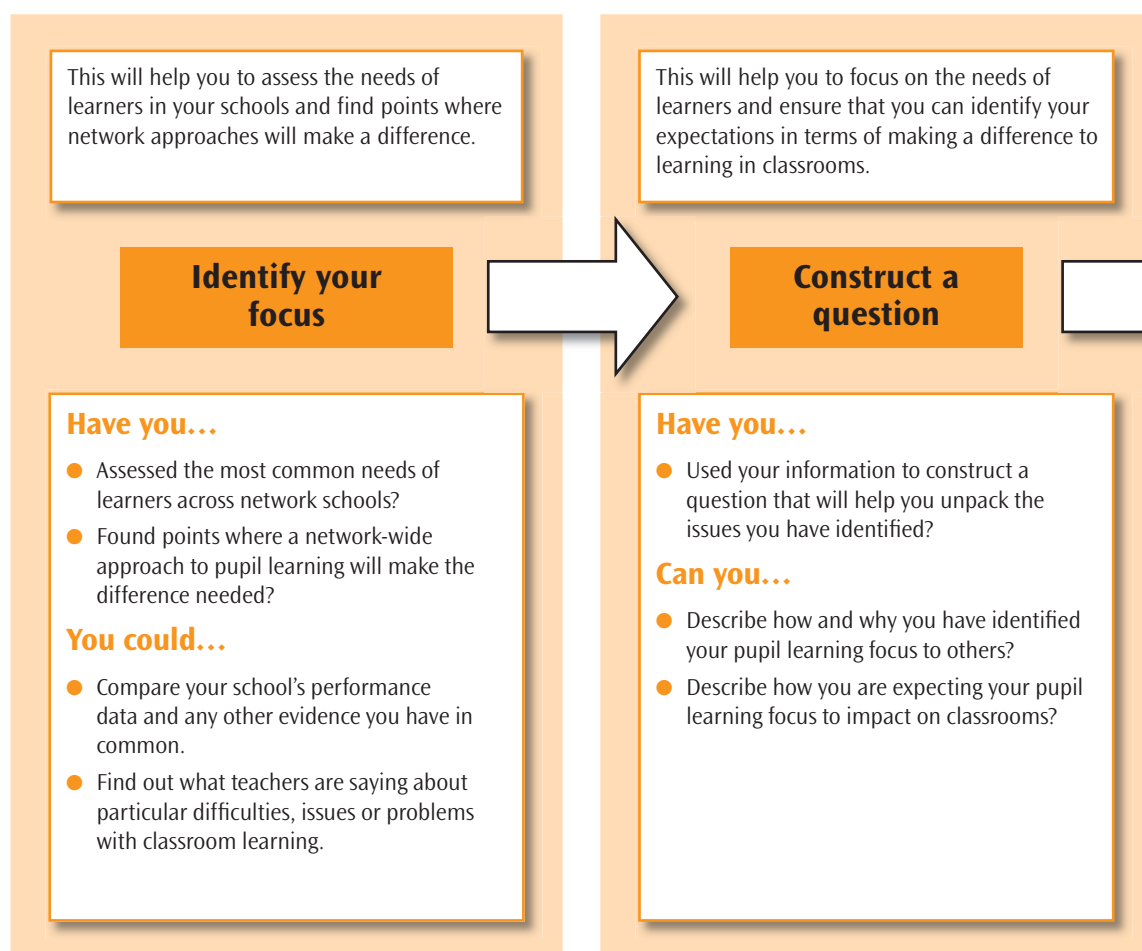
- Curriculum re-design eg integrating the teaching of arts subjects into literacy.
- Improving basic skills eg mental maths or extended writing.
- Developing learning and teaching skills eg thinking skills, interactive teaching.
- Involving pupils in teaching and learning eg incorporating pupil feedback into lesson design.

The process described on the following pages will enable you to construct your work so that it meets the needs of all learners and helps you to find the point where you can make the maximum impact on pupil outcomes. □

# Defining, refining and sharpening your learning focus

**Planning your pupil learning focus** is quite possibly the most important part of your network's journey. The course of action outlined here should feed directly into your action planning process.

This will help you to assess the needs of learners in your schools and find points where network approaches will make a difference.

This will help you to focus on the needs of learners and ensure that you can identify your expectations in terms of making a difference to learning in classrooms.

## Identify your focus

## Construct a question

### Have you…

- Assessed the most common needs of learners across network schools?
- Found points where a network-wide approach to pupil learning will make the difference needed?

### You could…

- Compare your school's performance data and any other evidence you have in common.
- Find out what teachers are saying about particular difficulties, issues or problems with classroom learning.

### Have you…

- Used your information to construct a question that will help you unpack the issues you have identified?

### Can you…

- Describe how and why you have identified your pupil learning focus to others?
- Describe how you are expecting your pupil learning focus to impact on classrooms?

## Questions about pupil learning to help you…

**1** What makes your pupil learning focus right for your network and how do you know?

**2** What difference is your pupil learning focus making to pupils' learning and achievements in your network?

**3** How will this influence future development of the network?

**4** Is your pupil learning focus impacting enough on classrooms?

**5** Will it in the future?

## Questions about adult learning to help you…

**1** What are the adults in your network going to do in order to learn about pupil learning?

**2** Of the evidence you are collecting in classrooms, what is impacting most on teachers?

**3** Are teachers doing anything differently as a result of what they are learning about pupil learning?

**4** If so, what?

Your network will need to identify a proven and well-evidenced pedagogical approach, or an aspect of one, which will help meet your needs eg assessment for learning, thinking skills, emotional literacy. This will help you describe what will be taught and how it will be done.

This will help you to make your learning focus specific and relevant to each school, year group, or subject area.

**Identify the pupil learning approach**

**Break it down**

**Identify the adult learning processes**

### Can you…

● Break your question down into a series of further questions that are actionable and manageable?

● Describe what you might be able to see, hear and feel in classrooms?

### Have you…

● Ensured that your questions are relevant to all the contexts in the network?

● Shared your questions with those who will be involved in the enquiry – including pupils?

Your network will need to identify what the adults in the network need to learn in order to become more expert and how that learning will be organised, eg will your network use mentoring, coaching, enquiry groups, learning walks, research lessons etc.

## Questions about leaders in networks to help you…

**1** How is the learning you have explored impacting on school and network leadership?

**2** What are network schools doing in response to what adults are learning about pupil learning?

**3** How will you use this and other data to inform future planning and activity?

## Of course, this isn't the end of the process…

Your network will revisit your pupil learning focus constantly and it will provide the basis upon which you review your success and impact. Effective networks ensure that they are always asking:

● What is changing in teaching and learning?

● How is it changing?

● Is it changing enough?

# Defining, refining and sharpening your learning focus

Use this space or photocopy this page.

| **Questions** | **Agree and summarise here** |
|---|---|
| **What do we know about gaps and areas for development in pupil learning across the network?**<br><br>**What hard and soft data have we drawn on?** | A |
| **What do we know about pupil learning strategies which, if developed across the network, could make a big and lasting difference to this area of pupil learning focus?** | B |
| **How could things be different with these approaches?** | C |
| **So... what is our pupil learning focus question?** | |
| **What adult learning strategies have we identified to develop and share expertise?** | |
| **What enquiry methods are we going to use to help identify new knowledge, new expertise and move it around the network?** | |
| **What structures and processes do we need to set up to ensure new techniques developed in classrooms can be learned and acted upon by everyone in the network?** | |

**Examples**

*Hard data might be: teacher assessment and test results, S4 or Ofsted judgements.*

*Soft data might be: pupil or teacher surveys / interviews, climate maps, hot/cold spot analyses.*

*Popular, well evidenced learning strategies or 'pedagogies' are described on page 9.*

*Do you have any expertise in the network already?*

*How does this fit with your compelling idea?*

*We know that A... So how can we use B to develop and create C... to boost pupil achievement?*

*Effective adult learning strategies such as those detailed on page 10.*

*What external knowledge and expertise will you need?*

*Effective networked development and enquiry models such as learning walks, research lessons and collaborative enquiry are described on page 10.*

*For example, a strategic learning group where enquiry lead learners keep school and network leaders briefed on developments, or network e-newsletters which communicate developments widely and vividly.* ☐

# Breaking down the pupil learning focus

**Here we provide** a practical example to show how one network could break down their pupil learning focus and work together to begin to provide some answers to their questions. In this example, it is possible to see how the network has thought about both the content of the pupil learning focus pedagogy and about the circumstances and needs of the schools, teams, or year groups within the network.

The network pupil learning focus question will be too big to apply to each school, let alone each subject, year group or classroom teacher.

## Network-wide question

We know pupils need to talk and communicate in order to learn collaboratively and the network faces challenging levels of underachievement in literacy and oracy. So, how can we re-design our approach to teaching literacy in order to improve pupils' skills in communicating effectively in learning? And how can we do this in ways which will support our implementation of the primary strategy?

The question needs to be unpacked and broken down into smaller, tighter, specific, actionable questions to make it relevant to the subjects, teachers and classroom contexts where it will be worked on. This makes it possible to operationalise the overall question, to mobilise enquiry activity at every level.

## School or subject question

How can we raise achievement in mathematics by linking assessment for learning with the skills we are teaching and consolidating in speaking and listening and literacy?

This helps develop nuggets of practice, grounded in classroom work, which can be captured and shared with others in the network.

## Year group team question

Can we use text-sequencing and prediction techniques in our break-out sessions in the daily mathematics lessons and how can we identify the most successful and build them into our scheme of work and share them across the network?

Teachers in a network with an assessment for learning focus were working together to develop an aspect of pupil talk. They asked themselves whether the devices they used with their Year 1 and Year 2 pupils were really getting 30 brains into gear.

They used research lessons (see page 11) to evaluate the active learning during their regular 'quick talk' sessions (eg 'think-pair-share', breakouts, buzzgroups, response partners etc). They found fewer than half the pupils were actively speaking and listening with purpose.

They, in turn, tweak and adapt these nuggets, creating shared practices and widening the repertoire of devices that teachers and pupils can draw on.

They used another research lesson to test a hypothesis they had developed. One pupil in each pair had to role-play their teacher asking questions and giving feedback. Despite the horror of seeing 15 or more mini versions of themselves teaching, the subsequent research lessons demonstrated an enormous improvement in pupils' engagement and progress. They tested it in literacy with similar results. They recorded their processes and led a staff meeting for colleagues, from their school, network and another network to share their findings. This technique is now being replicated in a growing number of classrooms. The two teachers videoed the technique they developed and put video-clips on their network website. ☐

# Learning processes

**Many networks have found** that having a clear rationale for their learning that is underpinned by publicly available knowledge is an important aspect of their work. The summary which follows gives very brief insights into some possible learning strategies and processes which network participants may wish to employ in underpinning their pupil and adult learning foci. The list is not exhaustive, it merely aims to cover some of the main areas that networks may wish to consider.

## Pupil learning focus

**Assessment for learning:** teachers make learning goals and success criteria explicit. They assess pupils' progress regularly and identify the practical next steps with them. AfL also involves: peer and self assessment, comment only marking and questioning to promote classroom dialogue.

ⓘ For more information visit:
www.qca.org.uk/ages3-14/66.html
www.learntolearn.ac.uk
www.aaia.org.uk

**Thinking skills:** since the explicit inclusion of thinking skills in the National Curriculum, interest in the teaching of thinking skills has burgeoned in the UK. Thinking skills approaches are emerging as a powerful means of engaging teachers and pupils in improving the quality of learning in classrooms. Ways of teaching thinking skills include Instrumental Enrichment, Philosophy for Children and Thinking Across the Curriculum. Specific teaching strategies include brainstorming (rapid production of ideas without critical examination, evaluation or elaboration), bridging (explicit links are drawn from what has been learned to other related contexts to help transfer), concept mapping and enquiry learning (pupils' learning through systematic gathering of observation and investigation).

ⓘ For more information visit:
www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/thinkingskills
www.sustainablethinkingclassrooms.qub.ac.uk

**Building learning power:** is about helping young people become better learners and developing their portable learning power. It is based upon research into learning and the brain, including practical trials in schools. Building learning power aims to provide a coherent picture of what it takes to be a good learner and capitalises on previous learning-to-learn ideas. It employs a number of techniques that aim to develop the appetite and ability to learn in different ways and transform the culture of the classroom and the climate of the school and shift responsibility for learning from the teacher to the learner, while engaging teachers and students creatively as researchers in learning. It focuses on the *Four Rs – resilience, resourcefulness, reflection and reciprocity* – as the key to successful lifelong learning. Teaching focuses on explaining, commentating, orchestrating and modelling.

ⓘ For more information visit:
www.buildinglearningpower.co.uk

**Accelerated learning:** the core elements are a conducive learning environment, effective use of music and visual aids in learning, creating a positive atmosphere and using role-play and drama. Recent work has drawn on learning how-to-learn approaches.

ⓘ For more information visit:
www.salt.cheshire.gov.uk/mfl/mflf.htm
www.acceleratedlearning.com/index.html

**Involving pupils:** many existing networks have found that involving pupils in the real work of schools is a productive exercise that carries high leverage. It includes the following practices:

- agreeing values and aims together
- visiting each other eg learning walks
- collaborative enquiry
- training together eg developing research
- communicating eg using ICT/video conferencing
- changing classroom and school relationships
- pupil voice eg school councils
- participation eg interviewing new staff
- students as researchers
- consultation around teaching and learning
- student leadership
- mentoring/peer mediation

ⓘ For more information visit:
www.nlcexchange.org.uk
www.tlrp.org/proj/phase1/phase/dsept.html

# Learning processes

## Adult learning focus

**Coaching and mentoring:** the term coaching tends to be used for activities that support improvement in specific skill areas and is most effective when there is a clear area to address that is central to the performance of the teacher. Mentoring tends to viewed as a more general experience that supports critical reflection on how to make improvements in specific aspects of collective or individual performance. For mentoring to be effective there needs to be a successful match between mentor and mentee, time for the activity and appropriate support and challenge from the mentor. Both practices have been successfully used in network cross-school collaborative settings.

ⓘ For more information visit:
www.coachingnetwork.org.uk

**Collaborative enquiry:** enquiry is the term used to embrace research, review, survey work, monitoring, evaluation, and other purposeful data generating activities that are a natural part of our work in schools, but with a particular focus, purpose and discipline. It is strongly linked to notions of 'good enough' or 'fit for purpose' research. Enquiry for school improvement involves purposeful, focused and informed engagement with the context of the school as a means of collaborative study and learning about the school's practice. It is done with a view to designing informed improvement interventions, both within classrooms and within the wider operations of the school. These arise from the knowledge generated and the contextual meanings made. Enquiry as a network tool adds diversity and expertise to these processes.

ⓘ For more information see:
www.ncsl.org.uk/mediastore/image2/nlg-dj-icsei.pdf

**Networked learning walks:** within schools and across networks, the use of the learning walk as an enquiry tool provides opportunities for professionals to share what they know and to learn directly and on behalf of others. Building upon the work of the Institute for Learning in Pittsburgh and recent pilot work at NCSL, this programme aims to establish protocols, guidance, and resources as a focused and powerful enquiry tool for open learning within and across school networks. Specifically, learning walks carry the following features:

● Sustainable enquiry processes based upon the lived experience of learning in specific network contexts.

● Rigorous and structured processes that require participants to identify a clear, learning-centred focus for enquiry.

● Guidelines and protocols that are flexible enough to accommodate each school's specific context and which encourage professional dialogue about leadership learning and classroom practice.

ⓘ For more information visit:
www.nlcexchange.org.uk
www.instituteforlearning.org

**Research lesson study:** a research lesson is a lesson designed, observed and analysed by more than one teacher (and sometimes pupils). It focuses around the intended and actual learning of a specified group of pupils. The lesson is discussed, the findings are recorded and the new knowledge is generated. The overall result of the study captures (at times using video) replicable practices which can be accessed across subjects, schools, phases and networks.

ⓘ For more information visit:
www.nlcexchange.org.uk
which includes a link to the research lessons website.

**Collaborative leadership learning:** a collaborative leadership learning group consists of groups of school leaders who commit to learning together. By using clear processes and protocols, they develop common purpose, enhance their own practice and build shared understandings. The challenge of CLL is to create that 'learning space' – a place where, collaboratively, school leaders can surface the burning issues in their professional lives around leadership and learning. It creates an environment which is both challenging and supportive – where greater understanding of the how, when and why of school leadership can be surfaced.

ⓘ For more information visit:
www.ncsl.org.uk/index.cfm?pageID=nlg-cll-index
www.nlcexchange.org.uk ☐

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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

To order a copy of this publication and others in this series, please email **nlc@ncsl.org.uk** quoting the reference **WAWLA/Establishing a network of schools**

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