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

Establishing a network of schools

Evaluating the work of networks

A development tool designed to be used during the
process of establishing a network of schools.

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

Evaluating the work of networks

The world is becoming a networked environment. Those creating new networks need to be mindful of the need to build into their design robust ways to evaluate their work, determine effectiveness and redefine their future operation. On the other hand, the evaluation methodologies currently practised in the international development sphere often fail to acknowledge and reflect the unique nature of school learning networks.

Monitoring and evaluation needs to be real and useful for networks. We have taken networks' own purposes and goals as our starting point in an attempt to discover methods of evaluation that are appropriate to their unique nature.

Essentially, a learning network has as its primary functions that of linking, co-ordinating and facilitating joint work and promoting collaborative solutions to common learning issues. Monitoring and evaluation in this context must be about those functions.

Naturally those within networks will need to agree the impact measures or 'proxy indicators' that they will use as the basis for the evaluation of network benefits. These can be widely defined and ought to be directly related to the compelling purposes that bound the network in the first instance.

Evidence from the Networked Learning Communities programme suggests that it is prudent and productive to build this into the landscape of the learning and to be mindful of the need to evaluate at all points on the journey towards success and sustainability. □

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the following individuals for their contribution to the generation and publication of this development tool: Madeline Church, Kathleen Armstrong, Mark Bitel, Priyanthi Fernando, Helen Gould, Sally Joss, Manisha Marwaha-Diedrich, Ana Laura de la Torre and Claudy Vouhé for their kind permission to reproduce an edited version of material from their publication *Participation, relationships and dynamic change: new thinking on evaluating the work of international networks*.

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A checklist for evaluating network-based activity

This checklist has been designed to help those establishing new networks to clarify their thinking around a strategy for evaluating the quality of the networking activity and, therefore, the networked learning.

The criteria provide a broad checklist of characteristics and some potential questions to ask when thinking about monitoring and evaluation in networks.

1 *What is a network?*

A network has:

- a common purpose derived from a shared perceived need for action
- clear objectives and focus
- a non-hierarchical structure

A network encourages:

- voluntary participation and commitment
- the input of resources by members for the benefit of all

A network provides:

- benefit derived from linking and participation

2 *What does a network do?*

- Facilitate shared space for exchange, learning, development – the capacity-building aspect.
- Act for change systematically – the advocacy aspect.
- Include a range of stakeholders – the diversity/broad-reach aspect.

3 *What are the guiding principles and values?*

- Collaborative action.
- Respect for diversity.
- Enabling all voices to be heard.
- Acknowledgement of power differences and commitment to equality.

4 *How do we do in accordance with our principles and values?*

Building participation

- Knowing the membership, what each can put in and what each seeks to gain.
- Valuing what people can contribute.
- Making it possible for them to do so.
- Seeking commitment to a minimum contribution.
- Ensuring membership is appropriate to the purpose and tasks.
- Encouraging members to be realistic about what they can give.
- Ensuring access to decision-making and opportunities to reflect on achievements.
- Keeping internal structural and governance requirements to a necessary minimum.

Building relationships and trust

- Defining a vision and articulating aims.
- Spending time on members getting to know each other, especially face-to-face.
- Network leaders have relationship-building as a vital part of their work.
- Members/network leaders build relations with others outside the network – strategic individuals and institutions.
- Facilitative leadership.
- Emphasis on quality of input rather than control.
- Knowledgeable about issues, context and opportunities.
- Enabling members to contribute and participate.
- Balancing the creation of forward momentum and action with generating consensus.
- Understanding the dynamics of conflict and how to transform relations.
- Promoting regular monitoring and participatory evaluation.

Fostering diversity and dynamism

- Have the minimum structure and rules necessary to do the work. Ensure governance is light, not strangling – give members space to be dynamic.
- Encourage all those who can make a contribution to the overall goal to do so, even if it is small.
- Work toward decentralised and democratic governance.
- At the centre, make only the decisions that are vital to continued functioning – push decision-making outwards.
- Ensure that those with least resources and power have the opportunity to participate in a meaningful way.

Building capacity

- Encourage all to share the expertise they have to offer.
- Seek out additional expertise that is missing.

5 *What are the evaluation questions that we can ask about these generic qualities? How do each contribute to the achievement of network aims and objectives?*

Participation

- What are the differing levels or layers of participation across the network?
- Are people participating as much as is feasible and they would like?
- Is the membership still appropriate to the work of the network? Purpose and membership may have evolved over time.
- Are opportunities provided for participation in decision-making and reflection?
- What are the obstacles to participation that the network can do something about?

Trust

- What is the level of trust between members? Between members and network leaders?
- What is the level of trust between non-governing and governing members?
- How do members perceive levels of trust to have changed over time?
- How does this vary in relation to different issues?
- What mechanisms are in place to enable trust to flourish? How might these be strengthened?

Leadership

- Where is leadership located?
- Is there a good balance between consensus-building and action?
- Is there sufficient knowledge and analytical skill for the task?
- What kind of mechanism is in place to facilitate the resolution of conflicts?

Structure and control

- How is the structure felt and experienced? Too loose, too tight, facilitating, strangling?
- Is the structure appropriate for the work of the network?
- How much decision-making goes on?
- Where are most decisions taken? Locally, centrally, not taken?
- How easy is it for change in the structure to take place?

Diversity and dynamism

- How easy is it for members to contribute their ideas and follow through on them?
- If you map the scope of the network through the membership, how far does it reach? Is this as broad as intended? Is it too broad for the work you are trying to do?

Democracy

- What are the power relationships within the network? How do the powerful and less powerful interrelate?
- Who sets the objectives, has access to the resources, participates in the governance? □

Factors to bear in mind when assessing sustainability

- **Change in key actors**, internally or externally – succession planning is vital for those in central roles.
- Achievement of initial targets or significant change leading to a natural decline in energy.
- Burn out and declining sense of added value of the network over and above every-day work.
- Decision-making and participation will be affected by the priorities and decision-making processes of members' own organisations.
- Over-reaching, or generating unrealistic expectations, may drive people away.
- Asking the same core people to do more may diminish reach, reduce diversity and encourage burn-out.
- Membership in networks tends to be fluid. A small core group can be a worry if it does not change and renew itself over time, but snapshots of moments in a network's life can be misleading. In a flexible, responsive environment members will fade in and out depending on the fit with their own priorities. Such changes may indicate dynamism rather than a lack of focus. □

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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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