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What are we
learning about...?

Facilitation within school networks

❝ *Successful network facilitators support organisational structures to connect schools within the network. They act as information brokers and support the development of knowledge and skills that help network members make smart decisions.* ❞

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Acknowledgements

Facilitation within school networks

What conditions do we need to create to make good ideas travel from school to school? Networks of schools are proving to be an essential means by which professional learning can be transferred and knowledge shared. As a consequence, school networks have come to be at the heart of the educational change agenda. However, many school leaders have found that the customary techniques they have been trained in are not enough to support the processes of effective knowledge transfer across and beyond their schools. A new kind of active collaboration is called for – and that requires conscious facilitation.

> ❝ *For a network to succeed it needs leadership with a vision of what is possible and determination to make it happen. This then needs to be backed up by facilitators who are able to give dedicated time to supporting the life of the network.* ❞
>
> NLC co-leader, NCSL, 2005

One of the distinctive features of successful networks is dedicated leadership and facilitation – both internal and external to the network (NCSL, 2005a). In the experience of Networked Learning Communities (NLCs) the process of embedding internal facilitation has become synonymous with the practice of distributing leadership within and between schools in a network. Put another way, facilitating the learning of others and supporting the processes of transferring learning between network members has become a central part of the work of school leaders at multiple levels within a network of schools. This includes, amongst others, those in the roles of network co-leader, lead learner, lead innovator, key teacher and lead researcher. It has, therefore, come to be regarded as a core function and skill-set required of all those involved in leadership roles in networks.

The National College for School Leadership (NCSL) has supported and researched networking and collaboration within the Networked Learning Communities programme, and much has been learned about facilitation in networks. In this think piece, we outline what effective facilitation within school learning networks looks like in practice and how it involves four key dimensions of activity.

Four dimensions of effective facilitation in school networks

1 **The facilitation of network development** – generating a shared focus on pupil learning by drawing network members together around a compelling idea and supporting professional development and leadership learning at all levels.

2 **The facilitation of networked learning** – utilising collaborative learning processes which optimise opportunities for learning from, with and on behalf of one another, at the school, network and system levels.

3 **The facilitation of networked enquiry** – developing collaborative approaches to enquiry which generate network data intelligence and collective knowledge about professional practice and the leadership of learning.

4 **The facilitation of network knowledge creation and transfer** – brokering the blending of knowledge from theory and practice with the creation and communication of new knowledge derived from collaborative work.

We hope that this think piece will be of use to you if you are considering setting up a network, are part of a newly formed or more established network, or are simply interested in finding out more about facilitation within school learning networks and its potential benefits for all. ☐

What does effective network facilitation look like?

The use of facilitation as a form of intervention is not specific to learning networks but is of wider interest. Its uses extend far beyond school networks and the education system. In our work with school networks we have found that facilitation is critical to accelerating the development of a learning community. Facilitation has been shown to promote understanding of innovation at a system level. This can be achieved through the capacity of facilitation to draw out learning and support knowledge transfer.

❝ Facilitation is a dynamic, personalised process which empowers and challenges individuals and groups to engage in significant learning. ❞

NCSL, 2005b

A facilitator is someone skilled in group dynamics and learning processes. He or she makes it easier for groups of people to work and learn together for an agreed purpose – their purpose, not the facilitator's. In a network, as in any other learning group, facilitation provides both support and challenge. It tends to work best when facilitators shape and frame, but do not dominate or direct. Allowing a group to work through its issues helps it to grow and become sustainable – to learn how to learn for itself. The interpersonal skills used in facilitation are the key to its effectiveness. Facilitators develop trust and credibility, maintain high levels of enthusiasm and feel confident with debate and challenge.

External facilitation of networks involves support for network leaders and for the structures and processes they put in place. The way a facilitator interacts – the questions, prompts, connections and support, enables a network to grow and engage in learning. Facilitators perform a balancing act between holding a network-wide view and an understanding of individual school needs.

The distinctiveness of network facilitation is that it is crucially centred upon the provision of support for, and the enactment of, four key learning processes.

Four processes of networked learning

1 **Learning from one another** is where groups capitalise on their individual differences and diversity through sharing their knowledge, experience, expertise, practices and know-how.

2 **Learning with one another** is where individuals are doing the learning together, experiencing the learning together, co-constructing the learning, making meaning together. Collaborative practitioner enquiry, or collaboratively learning about recent research are good examples of this activity.

3 **Learning on behalf of one another** is where the learning between individuals from different groups or schools is also done on behalf of other individuals within their network – or the wider system.

4 **Meta learning** is where individuals are additionally learning about the processes of their own learning so that they can replicate it in other situations or with other groups.

NCSL, 2005c

Networked learning can be said to take place when individuals come together in groups from different environments to engage in purposeful and sustained developmental activity informed by the public knowledge-base, utilising their own know-how and co-constructing new knowledge together. They learn with one another, from one another and on behalf of one another, both in the network's schools and the wider system. It is the job of those in facilitation roles within school networks to facilitate these networked learning processes.

There is an extensive literature on facilitation. John Heron (1999), for example, creates a typology of facilitation which outlines six areas in which facilitation can make an impact. In applying this typology to network facilitation those six areas are:

1 *Planning* – working out how best to achieve network goals.

2 *Meaning* – finding the best way to extract the experiences and knowledge of individuals within the network.

3 *Challenge* – knowing when attitudes and statements need to be challenged for the benefit of the network.

4 *Feeling* – having sensitivity to emotions and allowing them to be explored without de-railing the work of the network.

5 *Structuring* – demonstrating confidence in learning methods and group techniques, working out how the network's learning can be structured.

6 *Valuing* – respecting the integrity and diversity of individuals, encouraging individual growth, empowerment and a culture of questioning and ensuring equity.

As suggested above, school learning networks benefit from both internal 'facilitative leadership' and external 'critical friend facilitation'. Such a combination provides a catalyst for learning and behaviour change in and across the network through internal facilitation. It allows the external facilitator to act in the dual roles of critical friend and knowledge broker.

Facilitators support people to construct meaning by encouraging reflective practices and generating an energy about learning. They help participants recapture the passion for learning that led them to work in schools. They act as bridges by introducing powerful learning strategies and activities and by connecting ideas. They help participants to create knowledge by supporting enquiry across a network (NCSL, 2005d). Some of these activities involve knowledge brokering – which can mean facilitating the sharing of relevant and useful ideas, artefacts, processes, and contacts, both within the network and beyond.

Facilitation roles

Effective network facilitation in practice involves four key dimensions of activity characterised by four facilitation roles.

Four facilitation roles in school networks

1 **Developer** – identifying needs, active listening, deep questioning, planning and understanding barriers, creating a focus on pupil learning, supporting leadership learning.

2 **Networker** – making connections, optimising opportunities, reaching out to all stakeholders, understanding group dynamics, utilising suitable networked learning processes.

3 **Enquirer** – planning activities, reflection-making, focusing discussions, promoting joint working through collaborative enquiry and the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation.

4 **Knowledge broker** – purposefully blending theory and practice, engaging the learning of network members, brokering opportunities for creating and sharing new knowledge derived from collaborative work, encouraging artefact creation and exchange.

Facilitation activity will often reveal areas of overlap between these four roles. The role of developer often brings about a synergy between action undertaken in the other roles: *'It is the key catalytic function to make things happen.'* Carter et al, 2003.
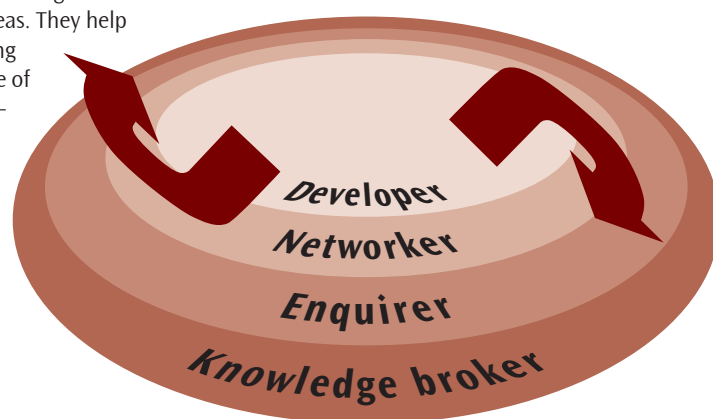

Figure 1 Network facilitation roles

As already suggested, these four facilitation roles in school networks can be undertaken by those either internal or external to the network – and often both. When asked to share their most powerful experience of internal and external facilitation, NLCs identified the following activity:

Internal facilitation

- headteachers taking a lead in encouraging more reluctant heads to participate actively in collective learning activities
- widespread use of co-coaching relationships between 'lead learners'
- support of network 'work groups' set up to develop networked learning focuses
- lead learners leading INSET across network schools – good role modelling of collaboration based in actual practice

External facilitation

- use of 'externals' as critical friends eg sharing ideas at national and international conferences and receiving feedback
- challenge from other contexts eg network-to-network opportunities
- use of valued HEI colleagues and involvement of NCSL and other external bodies as critical friends
- support for enquiry groups to allow the whole network to capitalise on the learning focus of the network

Example 1: Integrated facilitation function

A US school network reform effort, the Annenberg Challenge, found that a network's approach to facilitation is a key indicator of its overall effectiveness. Not only this, effective facilitation activity was found to cut across internal and external realms. Of four networks studied, two selected their own facilitators independent of the district. They 'owned' their facilitation. In these families, teams were empowered to work collaboratively and make decisions about matters of consequence integral to the achievement of their learning plan goals. The other two networks appointed facilitators selected by their respective school district, which complicated relationships, confusing facilitation and accountability.

Differences in the effectiveness of the four networks can be explained, in part, by the varying degrees of autonomy afforded to facilitators and to the network teams. The two networks that selected their own facilitators were particularly effective at creating network structures that decentralised power and distributed organisational resources throughout the network.

In the more successful networks the facilitators played three main roles:

1. *Supporting* organisational structures to connect schools within the network.

2. *Obtaining* and disseminating information within the network – being information brokers.

3. *Mediating* external pressures and facilitating the evolution of network responses rather than individual school responses.

Wohlstetter et al, 2003

Example 2: Moving from external to internal facilitation

This progression is also a crucial process as part of a shift to longer-term sustainability, as an episode from BSIP NLC's learning journey demonstrates. In February 2003 when the local authority numeracy consultant moved on, the network was robust enough to reconfigure itself and its facilitation processes. Following reflection and discussion, the corporate decision was taken to identify three leading maths teachers from within the network to co-lead and facilitate the community.

Initially this network exemplified the configuration of a centralised model with the local authority numeracy consultant acting as the central hub (NCSL, 2005e). As time passed, the pattern of communication and responsibility changed, reflecting the maturity of developing connections. The growth of social capital amongst the members enabled them to draw on each other's strengths, making connections beyond the original group as well as within it. Now the network can be represented as a multi-centred, multi-connected model.

❝ *The consultant used to provide all the ideas. When he left we had to develop our own materials, which meant we took ownership of them – the successes and the failures.* ❞

TMG co-leader, NCSL, 2005f ☐

The characteristics of effective facilitation within school networks

1 *The facilitation of network development – generating a shared focus on pupil learning by drawing network members together around a compelling idea and supporting professional development and leadership learning at all levels of the network.*

Network development is centred on having a shared focus on pupil learning which is also linked to adult learning or professional development and to leadership learning and development. Establishing and developing the interrelationship between these levels of learning is a fundamental facilitation task. The network's pupil learning focus should be relevant to the needs of pupils and grow from existing priorities and current data, so the work of the network will be aligned with the work that is ongoing in its schools. Teachers exercise leadership by connecting with each other's work across schools, so a key task is to consider how the adults in the network will learn together for the benefit of pupils.

Drawing network members together around a compelling idea is key to network establishment and development.

❝ *Successful facilitators worked as information brokers. They gathered information relevant to the network aspirations and also worked to build infrastructures for disseminating information. They often visited schools personally to inform participants about network activity and accomplishments.* ❞

Wohlstetter *et al*, 2003

To reduce barriers between people and encourage trust, it's a good idea to identify informal and flexible activities and settings that will promote the kinds of interactions that address the key aspects of the vision for the network.

A facilitator will want to keep an eye on the big picture to ensure that leadership activities fit together to maintain the important work of the network. Collaboration requires early concerted action which encourages individuals to see themselves as learners and embrace diversity through visible, familiar, trust-building activities such as launch events and interschool visitations. Network members say that opportunities to 'do' together are necessary for future learning and innovation as they develop a wider involvement and ownership of goals that take participation beyond a handful of core enthusiasts.

Successful networks have developed systems which distribute leadership throughout the network so that all adults within the network take responsibility for creating, validating and spreading knowledge about what works. Facilitation involves supporting the development of systems within the network which encourage everybody to contribute and to feel that their contributions are valued.

The following contexts for the facilitation of leadership learning have proved to be particularly powerful:

Collaborative leadership learning: External facilitators create opportunities for school leaders to learn with a group of colleagues about how to surface the burning issues in their professional lives around leadership and learning. Modelling the creation of an environment which is challenging and supportive allows for further internal facilitation of collaborative leadership learning opportunities throughout the network. See, for example: Woods & Mann, 2005 at **www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla**

Leadership learning forums: These kinds of action learning, practice-sharing groups might begin with external facilitation and focus on national strategy agendas. It is important that members subsequently set the learning agenda and address challenges specific to their own schools. Internal facilitation ensures that policy sharing, inter-visitations, resource sharing and problem-solving maintain the forum as an essential leadership learning space. See, for example: Westwell, 2005 at **www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla**

Leadership learning opportunities provided through leadership development programmes: These can be supported by means of peer coaching within project groups, headteacher support through strategic working groups and via subject-specific staff development. Network participation in NCSL's Leading from the Middle programme has proved popular in supporting the leadership learning opportunities made available to network middle leaders in particular. See, for example: Bagnall et al, 2005 at **www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla**

Woods, R & Mann, J, 2005, Collaborative Leadership Learning…does exactly what it says on the tin, *Nexus,* Winter, 2005, pp 32–33

Westwell, J, 2005, Leadership learning forums; a new way of learning together, *Nexus,* Winter, p 5

Bagnall, C, Booth, L & Wilkinson, R, 2005, Ice-cream innovation! Leading from the inside out, *Nexus,* Winter, pp 16–17

2 *The facilitation of networked learning – utilising collaborative learning processes which optimise opportunities for learning from, with and on behalf of one another, at the school, network and system levels.*

Networked learning occurs where people from different schools in a network engage with one another to learn together, to innovate and to enquire into their collective practices. Such activity tends to be purposeful, designed, sustained and facilitated. Unlike 'networking' it doesn't happen by accident. Facilitation, active support and brokerage are required.

Networked learning 'knots' – where people from different schools come together – are the right places to start in planning networks for these purposes. From our work with networks there seem to be five types of networked learning knot that require facilitation of one form or another.

> ### Five types of networked learning knot
>
> 1 **joint work groups** eg project teams or curriculum development groups
>
> 2 **collective planning** eg steering groups, professional development groups
>
> 3 **mutual problem-solving teams** eg focus groups
>
> 4 **collaborative enquiry groups** eg enquiry teams
>
> 5 **shared professional development activities** eg learning forums and joint staff days
>
> NCSL, 2005c

Some of these might be seen as being 'architectural' to the network, such as steering groups and learning forums, whilst others are more fluid and adaptive, such as enquiry teams and project teams. Both are important.

There also appear to be four sorts of networked learning knots which reflect types of networked learning activity that are particularly high-yield, both symbolically and practically:

- launch events and joint staff days

- headteacher learning groups

- a shared professional development planning function

- a monitoring, evaluation and dissemination group

Whether in an internal or external facilitation role, network facilitation involves engaging with these networked learning knots and facilitating their use for the purposes of learning from, with and on behalf of the school, the network and the system. The issue of dynamic and sustained participation and its purposes is crucial to an understanding of successful school networks. Answering questions about who participates, why, how, when, for what purposes and for how long, provides a useful framework for network facilitators to consider.

The following collaborative learning processes have been found to be particularly useful in supporting the facilitation of networked learning:

Collaborative headteacher learning involves an external facilitator in planning and leading sessions. Each other's practice is honoured by visiting each other's schools, enquiring into the challenge areas for the network and generating accounts of practice for discussion by headteachers and staff (NCSL, 2005a). For more details see: *Getting started with Networked School Self-evaluation* at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

Learning conversations involve the facilitated exchange of learning through interactive and collaborative dialogue. A facilitator within professional conversations will recognise and manage dialogue to find areas for new learning and action. For more details see: *Learning conversations in learning networks* at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

Open learning sets involve the identification of real issues and problems for collaborative analysis and action. The facilitator encourages participants to share their successes and failures to promote smarter knowledge exchange through shared analysis and the building of future scenarios. For more details see: *Open learning sets* at **www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla**

Coaching involves the development of professional helping relationships, where one person works with another to support them in developing knowledge, skills and strategies to improve their performance. For more details see: *Leading coaching in schools* at **www.ncsl.org.uk/research**

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3 The facilitation of networked enquiry – developing collaborative approaches to enquiry which generate network data intelligence and collective knowledge about professional practice and the leadership of learning.

The development of network data intelligence involves facilitating the process of network-wide data collection with a clear focus – to help inform the direction of network activity and further enquiry. A facilitator will prompt questions about whether the network's focus is the right one, and about how the network's learning is impacting on pupil learning, professional development and school leadership. Hard data like test results is considered alongside soft data like pupil or teacher surveys.

Facilitating a collaborative methodology for data collection and analysis, such as Networked Research Lesson Study or Networked Learning Study-visits is one way to engage in enquiry-based, shared leadership practices. It supports a commitment to evidence and data-driven learning as well as the development of collective knowledge about professional practice and the leadership of learning.

The facilitation of enquiry-based leadership and leadership learning involves encouraging an inclusive approach to engagement in a collaborative process of enquiry. This is recognised as providing a powerful vehicle for promoting more distributive leadership practices in schools and thereby building leadership capacity at all levels among network participants (Carter & Ireson, 2003).

We know that when teachers in learning networks are engaged in collaborative enquiry with teachers from other schools they are more likely to improve their own analytical thinking and to take risks. When people choose to come together to investigate and learn more about their educational community, engaging with current theory, gathering information, analysing and reflecting together on the data and identifying how this can inform change, it provides a context for generating network-wide knowledge that can have a direct impact on the children in classrooms across all the network's schools (Street & Temperley, 2005).

A challenge for facilitators is to ensure that the search for understanding is carried out through practice, so bringing about improvements in practice and understanding simultaneously. The facilitation of this process can lead to almost immediate professional change, since our perceptions and often our actions change the minute we start looking at and reflecting on our practices. This involves the facilitation of school leaders often working together with teachers, other staff and even students, in co-constructing collaborative, network enquiries. The effective facilitation of this form of collaborative enquiry has been shown to involve five key dimensions of activity.

Five dimensions of facilitation activity

1 Plan a specific, high leverage focus.

2 Be explicit about the learning you want to do.

3 Engage with public knowledge to affirm, support and challenge the learning of enquirers.

4 Ensure all enquirers are volunteers.

5 Invest time and space for learning.

Hart, 2005

The following collaborative enquiry processes have been found to be particularly useful in supporting the facilitation of networked enquiry:

Collaborative action research provides the opportunity for colleagues to identify, clarify and enquire into key issues of shared concern in their situation, whether that be a classroom, school or a network of schools. For more details see:

Two routes to an improvement solution at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

Appreciative Inquiry begins by recognising the best in people and their current practice. It offers people the opportunity to define collaboratively, through an enquiry process, the future of their school or network in relation to their values, goals and focus for networked learning. For more details see:

Two routes to an improvement solution at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

Networked Learning Study-visits are a series of organised and highly structured collaborative enquiry steps into the classrooms of a school, by colleagues from that and other network schools, in order to identify evidence of progress and areas for development. For more details see:

Getting started with Networked Learning Study-visits at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

Networked Research Lesson Study provides a framework for the collaborative study of the basic unit of teaching and learning – the lesson. A group of teachers collaboratively plan, teach, observe and analyse a series of lessons, deconstructing and writing up what they observe. For more details see:

Getting started with Networked Research Lesson Study at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

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4 The facilitation of network knowledge creation and transfer – brokering the blending of knowledge from theory and practice with the creation and communication of new knowledge derived from collaborative work.

At the heart of the networked learning models lies a recognition of the importance of the social construction of learning, the role of enquiry processes in applying learning in practice, and the need to draw equally upon three fields of knowledge. The fields of knowledge are utilised in a dynamic relationship with one another through network-based activity, application and study within classrooms.
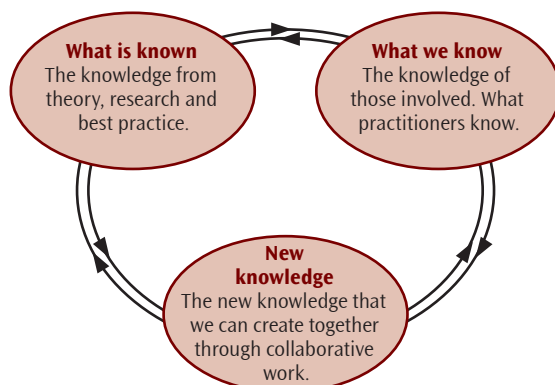
What is known
The knowledge from theory, research and best practice.

What we know
The knowledge of those involved. What practitioners know.

New knowledge
The new knowledge that we can create together through collaborative work.

Figure 2 Three fields of knowledge

Effective facilitation can harness, for the benefit of all involved, the most relevant information from three fields of knowledge. In this learning model the spaces created for conversation in the network – where practitioners can discuss the application of public knowledge to their professional practice – often require skilled facilitation. These conversations must move beyond the anecdotal and the hobby-horses of forceful individuals, so that they become places where collaborative learning takes place.

❝ Networks allow practice to cross the boundaries of individual schools and place innovative ideas in the marketplace of knowledge exchange, where they can be traded, refined and verified. ❞

NCSL, 2005a

The following approaches to the facilitation of knowledge transfer have been found to be particularly helpful to facilitators in taking on a brokerage role within a networked market place for knowledge exchange.

Communications strategies: The facilitation of a network communications strategy is crucial for successful knowledge transfer between schools. Every part of the network audience (eg classroom teachers, senior teachers, wider community members) needs to be reached in some way, whether that is by email, paper newsletters, group blogs, learning products, global e-newsletters or a press release. The more successful networks use traditional methods – phone calls, faxes and memos, and are also inventive about new communication methods such as dedicated bulletin boards in public places, a community newspaper, printed business cards and refrigerator magnets (Wohlstetter, 2003). See for example:
Leading networked communications; how do you do it? at **www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla**

Brokerage: Brokering knowledge exchange within and beyond networks is a key facilitation role. An external facilitator will broker access to knowledge and ideas by negotiating partnerships, utilising high levels of local knowledge, intelligence and influence. In successful networks, team meetings, workshops and seminars provide members with a forum for sustained conversations about improvement efforts. Internal facilitators are often members of multiple teams and are able to provide cross-fertilisation of information across the network. See for example:
Moving towards a subject learning community at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

Artefact creation and communication: Facilitating the creation and interpretation of artefacts is a key role for network facilitators. Network knowledge is often recorded in a range of different documents and products, using a range of different media eg DVD, CD-ROM, video, newsletters, leaflets, classroom displays, activity packs, research papers and learning materials. Facilitating the use of a commonly shared writing or presentation framework helps in ensuring an accessible strategy for the dissemination of a network's tacit knowledge. See for example:
Artefact creation in learning networks at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

Online communities: In an online dialogue, facilitators will need to offer ideas and ask challenging questions. They will also provide scaffolding for the discussion, encourage learners to interact with one another and to build off each response, rewarding thoughtful contributions. Facilitators encourage the development of a group dynamic in order to promote collaborative working where knowledge can be shared and exchanged and new knowledge constantly generated and communicated through ongoing interaction. See for example:
Turning the tide... at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc** ☐

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End piece

This think piece has brought different models of facilitation into focus. It illustrates both the diversity and some of the subtle complexities of the roles and activities involved in facilitating a network. In learning networks, generating engagement and sustaining the effort between challenging activities depend upon the facilitation of what Michael Fullan (2004) calls 'deep learning'.

❝ *Deep learning means collaborative cultures of inquiry that alter the culture of learning in the organisation away from dysfunctional and non-relationships, towards the daily development of a culture that can solve difficult or adaptive problems.* ❞

By 'working smarter together rather than harder alone', school networks provide a potentially powerful means by which this can be achieved. However, we know that it does not just happen by accident. It requires internal 'facilitative leadership' and external 'critical friendship facilitation'. In this think piece we have tried to set out some frameworks, drawn from both theory and practice, that might offer a structure to think about these facilitation roles.

As a final illustration we offer below some concrete examples of the practices of network facilitators as operational pictures of what leaders in these roles actually do.

Effective facilitation in learning networks involves:

● *problem-solving*, experimenting, innovating and taking risks in a safe-to-fail environment

● *identifying* and making explicit the detail of what participants know, can do and want to learn

● *addressing* challenges which benefit from collaborative rather than individual action

● *encouraging* collaborative working and learning – from, with and for others

● *prompting* extended, and structured professional dialogue rooted in evidence

● *making* beliefs, values and practice explicit to enable reflection and change

● *interpreting* new ideas and approaches in practical and specific contexts

● *blending* knowledge from theory and practice, and collaboratively constructing new knowledge

● *understanding* the enquiry and evidence needed to enable application and transfer of practice ☐

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- LEA involvement in school networks

- Establishing a network of schools

- Community leadership in networks

- *'Making mathematics count'* in school networks

- **Facilitation within school networks**

- Sustaining a network of schools

- Leadership of school networks

Networked Learning Communities

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