Think piece

What are we
learning about...?
Facilitation within school networks

Network facilitation: the power of protocols

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Network facilitation: the power of protocols

❝ *Learning is intellectual, social and emotional. It is linear and erratic. It happens by design and by chance. We all do it and we take it for granted, even though we do not have a clear understanding of what it means or how to make the most of it.* ❞

Stoll et al, 2003

Learning may be natural, messy and uncontrollable, but if the quality of learning in networks is to be improved in any significant way, there is a need to focus on how to organise for learning. Gathering together participants from multiple schools in learning networks can be difficult and expensive to arrange. Yet these joint learning opportunities have the potential to make a considerable difference to the success or failure of a network (NCSL, 2005). Launch events, joint staff days, networked headteacher learning groups, shared professional development opportunities and joint evaluation and dissemination sessions are amongst those networked learning activities which have been shown to be high-yield in terms of their impact upon the development of school learning networks (NCSL, 2005a).

❝ *The most effective opportunities for adult learning in networks tend to be dynamic and structured interactions between staff from different schools that centre on the overarching aim or pupil learning focus. These can be called networked learning opportunities. They are the places where people come together to engage in real tasks on behalf of the wider network.* ❞

NCSL, 2005

One thing is clear, however, these sorts of networked learning opportunities require facilitation, and protocols are the essential tools a network facilitator can use to maximise the learning opportunities.

This think piece recognises that networks have only limited opportunities for learning together face-to-face. It argues that to make maximum use of those opportunities there needs to be a structured and disciplined approach to learning, and it explains how the use of protocols can achieve this.

In this think piece we draw on the best of what is known about using protocols for organising learning in collaborative and networked contexts. The think piece uses expert knowledge based on real facilitation practice in networks. It identifies the use of protocols as an essential feature in the effective facilitation of network development, networked learning, networked enquiry and network knowledge creation. It provides some illustrative examples of the use of protocols drawn from the practice of network facilitation and sets out some essential features to assist those who are looking to introduce protocols as a powerful way to organise for learning in school networks. □

What are the protocols for organising learning?

❝ The kind of talking needed to educate ourselves cannot arise spontaneously and unaided from just talking. It needs to be carefully planned and scaffolded. ❞

McDonald et al, 2003

By protocols we mean the structured use of dialogue and conversation between professional colleagues. When a group of colleagues meets in order to learn together through an exchange of their practice, protocols provide an ordered and disciplined approach to learning. Facilitators will deliberately construct learning spaces so that participants are led through a series of specific learning activities.

Protocols aim to scaffold learning of three types:

- **additional learning** – adding to what is already known

- **adaptive learning** – reshaping what is known and understood

- **creative or innovative learning** – discovering new meaning, new ways of understanding and action

In order to enable these different types of learning to take place, a facilitator will use protocols to develop what participants already know, to make public knowledge available to them and to ensure that the collaborative construction of different meanings, understandings and interpretations brings about the creation of new collective knowledge.

At the heart of the learning models we draw upon in our work with Networked Learning Communities (NLCs), lies a recognition 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. Within this model of learning, the three fields of knowledge are utilised in a dynamic relationship with one another through network-based activity, application and study within classrooms.
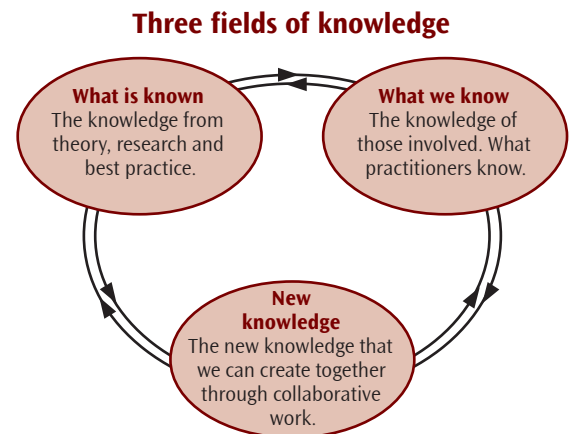
Three fields of knowledge

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 1 The networked learning model

In networks a key role for facilitators – whether they are internal to the network or engaged by the network to provide an external facilitation function – is to enable the development of a dynamic interaction between activity within the three fields of knowledge. This needs to be done in ways which actively engage network participants with each field of knowledge in equal part. An illustrative example of what this looks like in practice is given below.
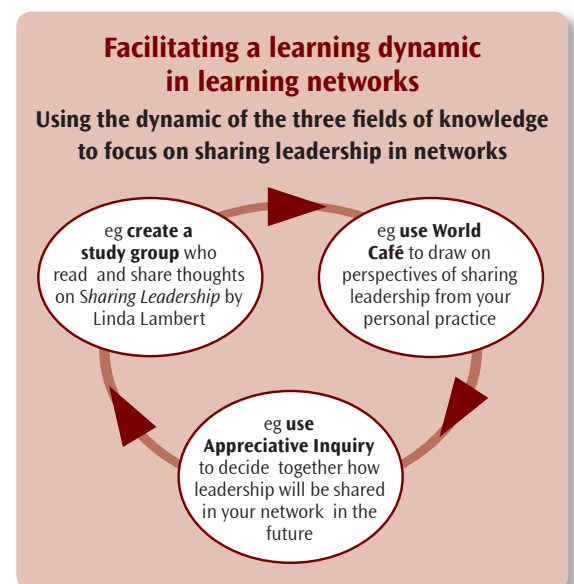

Facilitating a learning dynamic in learning networks

Using the dynamic of the three fields of knowledge to focus on sharing leadership in networks

eg **create a study group** who read and share thoughts on *Sharing Leadership* by Linda Lambert

eg **use World Café** to draw on perspectives of sharing leadership from your personal practice

eg **use Appreciative Inquiry** to decide together how leadership will be shared in your network in the future

figure 2 Facilitating a learning dynamic □

What is known – making public knowledge accessible

❝ If nobody in the group 'knows' the answer, where do you go to find things out? This is the leap into the culture as a warehouse, a toolhouse or whatever. There are things known by each individual (more than each realises); more still is known by the group or is discoverable by discussion within the group; and much more still is stored somewhere else – in the 'culture', say, in the heads of more knowledgeable people, in directories, books, maps and so forth. ❞

Bruner, 1996

Practice made explicit is a rich resource for learning which can be significantly enhanced by knowledge that is in the public domain – research, established theory, ideas grounded in practice from elsewhere and so on. By engaging with this knowledge base, often we can see things in a new light or from a new perspective, or we can reach a new understanding of what it is that we need to do. The problem is that most of this so-called 'publicly available' knowledge can be difficult to access. It may be available, but often it is not accessible. For the network facilitator, finding ways to make external knowledge accessible is important.

There are proven ways of making this sort of external knowledge accessible to network participants. This includes, for example, providing access to extracts, summaries, précis, magazine or journal articles and think pieces, in either printed or online formats. This can bring often remote and inaccessible knowledge to the attention of network practitioners in a form that allows them to make sense of it. With the facilitated application of learning protocols, however, network participants can gain much more from accessing the public knowledge base.
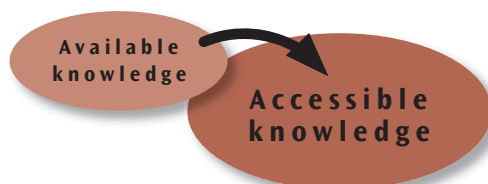
Facilitators can use a number of protocols to enable network participants to engage with the available public knowledge base in a way which encourages its accessibility and usability in their context. The following processes, each with their own underpinning protocols, have proved to be effective in facilitating access to the public knowledge base amongst those in school networks and in other collaborative learning contexts.

Teacher Researcher think pieces:
● Dadds, M, 2004, *Perspectives on practitioner research*
● Hadfield, M, 2004, *Knowledge management and action research*
● Leat, D, 2004, *Partnership and participation in teacher research*
● McGregor, J, 2004, *Students as researchers,* Nottingham, NCSL
● National College for School Leadership, 2006, in press, *Network leadership in action: Sharing leadership,* Nottingham, NCSL

● **Using think pieces for personal study**

During a networked teacher-researcher programme, a series of think pieces was introduced to network participants to engage them with the public knowledge base regarding practitioner research. This aimed to support individuals within their role as 'Network Enquiry Advocates'. A protocol was adopted whereby reflective questions relating to the content of the think piece were posed in the text at appropriate intervals. Participants were invited to respond with written reflections regarding their context and practice relating to their interpretations of key points raised. These were then followed up in joint discussion with others. For further details see:

Teacher Researcher think pieces at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc** Click on 'Network Research'.

● **Developing collaborative study groups**

A collaborative study group is formed by peers who meet together to reflect on practice and to consider contributions from theory and research. The study group process is underpinned by protocols such as ensuring that all group members participate equally in discussion. The power of the process lies in the critical engagement with the literature and the new knowledge generated by the interaction of group members (NCSL, 2002). See for example, Mohr, 1998.

● **Applying conceptual frameworks**

As pre-reading for a seminar involving school and network leaders, participants were asked to consider the theoretical perspectives outlined in a series of think pieces and accounts of practice. A protocol was applied whereby participants were asked to examine these perspectives with a particular conceptual framework in mind. This involved exploring the concepts of distributed leadership, learning-centred leadership, enquiry-based leadership and leadership for moral purpose. Having explored these ideas as presented in the literature, they then went on to apply this conceptual framework to an analysis of their own practice. For further details see:

Network leadership in action: Sharing leadership at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

A critical step in the facilitation process involves creating for participants a dynamic interaction between accessing, interpreting and learning from what is known from the public knowledge base, and what they know and bring to the table from their professional knowledge and context experience. For many, this involves what John Elliott (1991) calls 'bridging the theory-practice divide'. ☐

What we know – making practice visible

> **Making the professional knowledge base of teaching explicit and valuable for school teachers is fundamental to pursuing their common goals of increasing understanding of the ways in which children and adults learn most effectively…**
>
> Day, 1999

Much of what teachers or leaders do in their day-to-day practice in classrooms and schools is often not known to others, even to those in their immediate environment. As a result, recognising, appreciating, articulating and sharing with others the professional practices in which we engage, can be a challenge in itself. Education professionals often act intuitively, instinctively or from habit. Quite often they do not recognise all of what they do, how skilful they are or what expertise and experience they have. In other words, the professional knowledge base from which teachers and other educational professionals operate is sometimes difficult to penetrate and make explicit. It often remains tacit – hidden, or locked away in the implicit thoughts and behaviours of individuals as they enact the work of leadership or teaching in their everyday lives.

In order to unlock the potentially powerful collaborative learning which can be drawn from this professional knowledge, it is necessary for facilitators to provide supportive processes which enable network practitioners to identify, analyse and reflect upon their practice. The use of protocols can assist in this process.

A first step, then, towards helping education practitioners to learn from and with each other in a collaborative way, is to assist them in making their practice explicit and visible to others. This is skilful work. Making the tacit explicit takes practice. Protocols offer tried and tested ways to enable practitioners to articulate their experience, skills, attitudes and knowledge.

Tacit knowledge → Explicit knowledge
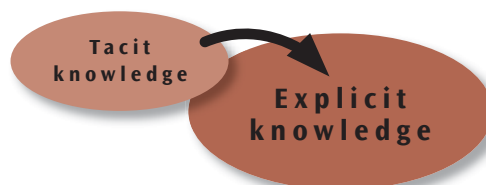
The following approaches and their associated protocols have proved to be effective in facilitating the process of enabling network practitioners to articulate their professional experiences. They have been used successfully to support participants in capturing the detail of their practices and identifying the skills, attitudes and knowledge used in network activity and the leadership of learning at multiple levels within their school or network.

● **Exploring practice – narrative as text**

Practice narratives – The initial stage of Appreciative Inquiry 'discovering the best of what is' can be used effectively to engage participants in the creation of practice narratives. This protocol involves the production of written accounts which capture stories of practice experienced at its best, which can then be shared with others. It helps if there is guidance to structure stories in ways which capture the knowledge, skills, attitudes, values and feelings involved. For more details of the outcomes of this approach see:

System thinkers in action; perspectives from practice at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nexus**

● **Capturing practice – personal reflection**

Learning journals – Turning experience into learning can be helped by the use of a learning journal. As a protocol, learning journals provide a framework for reflection, enabling practitioners to trace their emerging learning and understandings about their practice. When used in a collaborative context, learning journals can also enable individuals to share their development with others (NCSL, 2002).

● **Examining practice – collaborative reflection**

World Café – This approach is rooted in a belief that creating a positive future begins with human conversation, that the simplest and most powerful investment any member of a community or an organisation may make in renewal is to begin talking with other people as though the answers mattered. For details of the protocols underpinning this process see:

www.theworldcafe.com

Working with the frameworks provided by protocols shifts from a position of engaging participants in 'reflection on action' to one of 'reflection in action' – as they move towards engagement with the third field of knowledge, that is, co-constructing new knowledge collaboratively with others. As Donald Schon (1983) describes:

> **There are forms of professional knowledge which, though often tacitly held, are essential for the exercise of judgement as the complexities and dilemmas of professional life are confronted. Such knowledge is in professional action, and may be developed by reflection in action.** □

Church, J, Cottrell, J & Eastes, C, 2004, *System thinkers in action; perspectives from practice,* paper presented to the Collaborative Action Research Annual Conference, Malaga, Spain, November. Available from 'Nexus linked resources', Issue 6, Network leadership in action, Autumn 2005.

Creating new knowledge together through collaborative work

❝ Learning is at the heart of school reform... an important aspect of this learning is that it occurs in collaboration as people work together to make sense of their world. ❞

Erschler et al, 2001

When education practitioners meet together they never have much difficulty in finding things to talk about. They have a lot in common. Their experiences lie in a common field of activity and so their meetings are full of stories of their experiences, the questions they are wrestling with, shared uncertainties, a variety of solutions and some good advice. But the full potential for learning will not be achieved unless and until there is a deliberate co–construction of new meaning and understanding for the individual and for the group. Simply chatting to each other won't do it.

Gathering teachers, learners or leaders together in one place doesn't guarantee that it will be a learning occasion. In our view, that depends upon the extent to which individual knowledge is made explicit, the use that can be made of the learning out there in the public domain, and upon the level of collaborative engagement within the group. This needs to move beyond a basic level of sharing by exchanging information, towards the co-creation of new knowledge and innovation through a widening of perspectives – changing the way we see things and bringing new ideas into play.

Individual knowledge → Shared knowledge
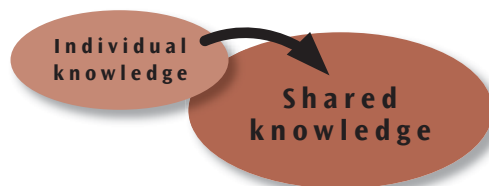
❝ Learning is best when it is participatory, proactive, communal, collaborative, and given over to constructing meanings rather than receiving them. ❞

Bruner, 1996

Protocols offer a way of deliberately integrating these elements into all professional development and leadership learning opportunities in networks. The protocols used by the NLC programme in its leadership learning provision are specifically chosen and designed to make the above principles vividly present, both in the practice of learning together and in the process of generating new knowledge from this collaborative work. The following examples provide a practical illustration of these protocols in action.

● **Exchanging knowledge for shared learning**

Learning conversations require facilitator skill in both deep listening and deep questioning. Protocols 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** Click on 'Network resources'.

● **Sharing knowledge for joint problem-solving**

Open learning sets involve the facilitator engaging participants in reflection for action which results in a collaborative approach to problem-solving. This involves the protocol of identifying 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/nlc** Click on 'Network resources'.

● **Generating shared knowledge for future action**

Appreciative Inquiry is a futures-oriented approach to transformational change and organisational development. It is located in the key concepts of valuing, exploration and discovery, asking questions and seeking new potentials (NCSL, 2002). Facilitation of this approach to generate shared knowledge for future action requires the facilitation of the protocols associated with four distinct phases of enquiry: discover, dream, design, deliver. For details of the protocols underpinning this process see:

www.appreciativeinquiry.cwru.edu www.taosinstitute.net

We recommend the practice of a protocol on a number of occasions in order to maximise its effectiveness. The repeated use of a protocol not only enables the learning group to make the maximum gains from the methodology, it also helps the participants to learn how to learn. Once learned, the protocol principles and the particular rubric can be applied in many settings: with staff, with parents, with governors, with students. And the learning habits within the protocols – deep listening, deep questioning, openness, equity, trust – become embedded in the learner and in the culture of learning within the network. □

National College for School Leadership, 2005, *Learning conversations in learning networks,* Nottingham, NCSL
National College for School Leadership, 2004, *Open learning sets,* Nottingham, NCSL

Network facilitation protocols: essential features

1 Protocols assume that colleagues gather together with a purpose, which is to learn.

It is good to celebrate achievement together by recognising what is being done well, but this is not a process for refining delivery or improving things operationally, though that may be an outcome. It is much more an interrogation of practice, which seeks innovative ways to perform differently. Protocols are designed to reveal the gaps in our learning. They deliberately move the focus of the learning activity into the areas of our uncertainty, of choice and intuitive judgements, in order to find the areas for new learning. These uncertain places can be uncomfortable and call upon high levels of trust to have been established before the risks involved in learning can be undertaken.

> **Although not all members of the group felt themselves to be taking risks, those who did felt that they would have found it really helpful to have access to the experience of others who had tried something innovative. Courage to take risks needs to be underpinned by a sense that the risk is worth taking…**
>
> Dadds & Hart, 2001

2 Protocols provide a clear organisational framework for learning.

'They segment the elements of a conversation or discussion, the boundaries of which are otherwise blurred.' For instance, *'they make clear the differences between talking and listening, between describing and judging, or between proposing and giving feedback'* (McDonald et al, 2003). This formula requires discipline from the participants, which is to *'constrain behaviour in order to enhance experience.'* Many of them have strict rules, required order and specific time frames. For this order to be implemented, the process requires facilitation which may be undertaken by someone from outside or by one of the group. Either way the group needs to agree upon the choice of facilitator and what they are to do.

Pause for thought…?

When groups of colleagues come together in your network, how can the core purpose of learning be established collectively?

What strategies might you use with networked learning groups to ensure that the disciplines and ground rules of learning protocols are adhered to?

Please use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

3 *Protocols depend upon establishing an atmosphere of trust between learners.*

Protocols, despite their clear organisational structures, raise uncertainties for learners when they are required to expose their practice to examination from fellow professionals. All learning groups rely upon an atmosphere of trust in which colleagues can speak openly and honestly, but if we deliberately open up practice, making it transparent, and expose this practice to critique by fellow professionals we need to take special care. The inclusion of some level of dissonance is necessary to encourage deeper analysis and consideration of what may be habitual practice, but if we are to accomplish this, we need accompanying high levels of trust. And if practice is to be re-formed and transformed as a consequence, that too requires a great deal of trust.

❝ *At its heart facilitation is about promoting participation, ensuring equity and building trust.* ❞

McDonald et al, 2003

4 *Protocols require a commitment from learners to reach understanding together.*

The participants in the learning group commit to reaching understanding together. This requires an enquiring stance in which everything is open to question and questioning is the norm so that reflection, individual and shared, is an ever-present attitude as well as a particular written or spoken activity. As Berlak & Berlak (1981) describe: *'Reflection is a fundamental necessity, because there are no simple prescriptions concerning what 'best' educational practice might be. That is what makes the job both so interesting and challenging.'*

Pause for thought…?

How can an atmosphere of trust be built amongst network participants and within learning groups in your network?

What strategies might you use to develop a questioning, enquiry stance amongst network participants, which promotes a reflective attitude to the work you do together?

Please use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

5 *Protocols demand equity of voice, contribution and benefit for learners.*

Protocols ensure that participants have equity of voice, contribution and benefit within a collaborative learning model. This offers isolated practitioners attempting to improve their practice a co-operative group of fellow professionals with whom to engage in order to challenge and assist their own and each other's learning and development. To do this, they draw upon the contribution of the 'experts' in the group, who are their fellow practitioners. The knowledge that each participant brings, forms the content and substance of the process.

> **According to research, teacher learning is an organic process rather than an accumulation of facts and discrete pieces of information. For teachers to assimilate new ideas into their knowledge base they need opportunities to pose questions, view situations from multiple perspectives, examine their personal beliefs and assumptions, and experiment with new approaches.**
>
> Langer et al, 2003

6 *Protocols ensure that collaborative learning and reflection is followed by action.*

Protocols ensure that participants engage in reflective learning or enquiry activities as a precursor to collaborative action. It is therefore important that the discovery of new knowledge, ideas, meanings or interpretations arising from collaborative work is accompanied by a commitment to action on the part of participants. Being open to being changed and to changing professional practices as a result of this interaction is crucial. Protocols can be used to ensure that joint problem-solving and decision-making are facilitated effectively, and that the group, school or network becomes jointly accountable for taking action on collective decisions.

Pause for thought…?

What strategies could you use to ensure that collaborative learning opportunities in your network encourage equity of voice, contribution and benefit for participants?

How will you go about securing a commitment to collaborative action and accountability to joint decision-making in your network?

Please use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

7 Protocols require repeated use and practice to benefit learners fully.

Repetition and practice are required for the full benefits of collaborative working processes to be experienced. These are not events, but habitual ways of learning. The more practised the participants become in using and applying protocols in the context of their collaborative work, the deeper the learning becomes. Once learned and practised, the protocol becomes a transferable form of learning. Finding the best ways to learn together collaboratively is a formula that, once experienced, can be applied across a range of learning contexts in a network. Practising the use of protocols which have been tried, tested and shown to work, helps to build up a repertoire of approaches to collaborative work which can be customised to suit the particular network, group or school context.

> ❝ *Practical wisdom as the form of the practitioner's professional knowledge is not stored in the mind sets of theoretical propositions, but as a reflectively processed repertoire of cases. Theoretical understandings are encapsulated in such cases, but it is the latter which are primarily utilised in attempts to understand current circumstances.* ❞

Elliott, 1991

8 Protocols provide a means by which learners are empowered to take ownership.

Using protocols to underpin collaborative working in networks provides a powerful means by which professional educators can take command of their own learning and develop a collective sense of ownership of network development. By combining that intimate knowledge only known to practitioners with what can be learned from outside expertise, a future direction is defined by those who will lead it. In this way of working, development is not driven from the outside, from external initiatives or requirements, but from the considered wisdom of the network practitioners involved. This is something that we can do for ourselves. ☐

Pause for thought...?

How might your network develop a repertoire of approaches to collaborative work?

What strategies could your network use to enable participants to draw on a combination of insider knowledge and outside expertise, in ways that encourage a continued sense of ownership of network development?

Please use this space to record your thoughts and ideas

End piece

NCSL has drawn upon and developed a wide variety of protocols in its leadership learning activity across a range of leadership development programmes. In this think piece we have tried to distil the lessons learned from this experience, focusing in particular upon the use of protocols within learning networks. For those working in leadership and facilitation roles in school learning networks, we hope that these can function as an essential checklist for using protocols in collaborative contexts.

Clearly, individuals engaging in facilitation using these protocols need to have a thorough knowledge of the underlying principles and the particular collaborative learning processes involved. In order to establish credibility with groups of adult learners within a network, they also need to have at their fingertips: a secure knowledge of a range of protocols; an understanding of how groups work and a grasp of the processes involved in engaging others in collaborative activity.

Whilst this think piece has attempted to set out a route map to the essentials of facilitation – with the aim of providing some sign posts to resources and sources of knowledge along the way – we recognise that this knowledge on its own is not enough. The real challenge for those involved in leadership and facilitation roles in school networks, however, is to be able to apply actively what is known, what they know and what can be learned together about the most effective ways of engaging network participants in collaborative work. It is in this domain of network activity where the use of protocols has been shown to energise networked learning and development in powerful ways.

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Networked Learning Communities

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