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What are we
learning about...?

Facilitation within school networks

Activating the learning space in networks

An illustrative account of what network
facilitation looks like in practice.

Activating the learning space in networks

The accounts of practice presented within this series aim to provide concrete examples of facilitation in school learning networks. In particular, they provide a practical illustration of the significant elements we have found to be evident when developing effective facilitation within a networked context.

❝ *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. It has, therefore, come to be regarded as a core function and skill-set required of all those involved in leadership roles in networks.* ❞

There are now many schools, both in the UK and internationally that are benefiting from working together as a network. By drawing upon their experience and that of others who are actively involved in the facilitation of school learning networks, it is possible to identify what effective facilitation within networks looks like in practice and look at how it involves four key dimensions of activity.

Four key dimensions of facilitation activity in networks

1 the facilitation of network development

2 the facilitation of networked learning

3 the facilitation of networked enquiry

4 the facilitation of network knowledge creation and transfer

The accounts of practice in this series explore in different ways and with differing emphases, these key characteristics of network facilitation. In so doing, they help to explain what effective facilitation in networks looks like in practice. Considering these dimensions of activity in the process of developing facilitation within a networked context will help to ensure that future development is built from the best of what is known from current thinking and practice. We hope that these accounts of practice will, therefore, be of practical use to you – if you are considering setting up a network, 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. □

Acknowledgements

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Activating the learning space in networks

This account of practice is a personal reflection, drawing on many years' experience of facilitating in a variety of contexts. I hope to share some of the lessons I have gleaned from working with many other experienced facilitators and through engaging in theoretical discussions about facilitation. The account aims to develop an understanding of facilitation and the role of a facilitator within a network. I will also be outlining what I think are some of the key skills and competencies needed by a facilitator. The account is not meant to be definitive in nature; it is more my intention to provide a perspective which will encourage you to explore your own understandings of facilitation. It will be of particular interest to anyone involved in a collaborative learning network, including network co-leaders, facilitators and local authority officers.

Facilitating learning in networks

What is facilitation? I define it as the process of creating a learning space for an individual or group. This space makes it easier for them to engage, work and deal with issues that are important to them. According to Priest et al (2000) '*the goals of facilitation processes are to produce changes in people's thinking, feeling or behaviour.*'[1] This, in simple terms, is exactly what learning is.

When I facilitate a network I create and hold a learning space. This safe physical, intellectual and emotional space is a place in which participants can learn. As a facilitator, I do not have the answers, but I enable a process to unfold which allows the participants to find their own answers. Through a variety of activities a facilitator makes it possible for group members to:

- **engage** critically with externally validated knowledge, established practice and other public knowledge

- **reflect** on their experiences, making tacit knowledge explicit

- **create** new knowledge on a personal and group level

This learning model is referred to as the three fields of knowledge. As a facilitator I create a learning space which enables the three fields of knowledge to be activated in a dynamic exchange. In turn, this activates the actions of effective network facilitation.

The actions of effective network facilitation

- Facilitating enquiry processes which encourage reflective practices and provide formal opportunities for reflection on practice.

- Generating a 'buzz about learning' amongst network participants in a variety of contexts, eg conferences, events, working groups, steering groups, development sessions, study or enquiry groups.

- Supporting a position where learning is seen to be an ongoing process for all network members irrespective of their roles or positions in the school hierarchy.

- Creating a collaborative learning environment in which *all* network members feel comfortable asking questions, eg questions about the language, policies and reasons behind things; about the long-term view and approaches.

NCSL, 2005[2]

I believe that, in learning networks, the learning space is created through four distinct characteristics of effective facilitation which enable: network development; learning; enquiry; and knowledge creation. Throughout the remainder of this account of practice, I aim to share the processes which I have found to be effective in activating the learning space in networks and bringing these characteristics of facilitation to life in practice. □

[1] Priest, S, Gass, M & Gillis, L, 2000, *Essential elements of facilitation: skills for enhancing client learning and change,* Tarrak Technologies
[2] National College for School Leadership, 2005, Facilitating learning networks. In *What are we learning about…? Establishing a network of schools,* Nottingham, NCSL

What does a facilitator do?

The role of the facilitator according to Priest et al (2000) is to enable the 'flow of facilitation' by:

- **diagnosing** the needs of the group

- **designing** a learning programme or process that meets these needs

- **delivering** the process

While this seems to be a linear process, it is not – these stages can happen simultaneously, some might continue throughout the facilitation process.

Diagnosing the needs of the network

Understanding the nature of the network you are facilitating is important. If you were facilitating a collaborative learning group, you would need to understand the sensitivities of its context such as the members owning and setting the protocols and agenda. Understanding this will give you an idea of the role you have to play, but each collaborative learning group is different. As facilitator I try to get to know the participants' context and who they are working with in order to respond holistically to their needs. There is a lot of information which can be collected before beginning work with a group and the process of diagnosis continues as I start to interact with them and their network context.

Facilitation in practice...questions?

Some questions I have found useful to consider in getting to know groups in networks are:

- Who are the people involved in the network?

- What schools do they come from? Are they all from one type of school or a mixture?

- Do they come from the same kind of situations, eg urban, rural, coastal, failing?

- What positions do the group members hold in their schools? Are they all headteachers or a mixture from different levels?

- Does the network exclude or include people from external agencies?

- Is this the first time they have worked in a collaborative learning group?

- Do participants in the network have a history of working together?

- How well did they work together and why do they want to become a learning network?

Spot the barriers

Understanding these issues helps me to spot the behaviours and practices within a group which could become a barrier to learning. It also enables me to identify and build on previous successes. As I continue to work in the network, I can find out what the preferred styles of the group are and ensure that activities are included which support them.

Identify network expectations and purpose

An important part in the diagnosis stage is to find out from the participants what their expectations are and what success might look like. It is important to do this early on in the process because it helps the network to evaluate its progress as the process unfolds. Knowing this purpose allows me to determine what activities are needed and the 'scaffolding' and support people may need in between sessions.

Clarify expectations about your role as facilitator

It is essential to clarify your own expectations about your role as a facilitator. It may be useful for you to discuss these expectations with others. I have found it helps if you explore these ideas together with the groups you are facilitating. For example, it may be possible to identify aspects of the work that you anticipate will be difficult to manage, and as a result make an agreement on your working relationship in order to address these issues.

Facilitation in practice...questions?

Some questions I consider when working with a new network are:

- Are you an internal or external facilitator?

- What opportunities and challenges does this present?

- What expectations do you have of yourself as a facilitator?

- What expectations do you have of the group?

- How much influence do you have with the participants?

- In what ways will your influence provide an opportunity or act as a barrier?

Designing the programme

Once I have an understanding of the purpose of the learning programme and the needs of the group, I can start to design the appropriate learning processes. During the design stage, it is important to think about and agree on the depth and breadth of facilitation activity within the programme as well as the choice and sequencing of learning activities. At this point, it is also useful to address any logistical issues such as venues, timings and the resourcing of the collaborative learning activities.

Facilitation in practice…questions?

Some questions I use when designing a facilitation programme are:

- How does the programme fit into the work, needs and agenda of the participants?
- Who needs to be involved in the planning and facilitation?
- What are the time frames?
- What is the frequency of the sessions?
- What resources are needed?
- What funding is needed?

Delivering the process

Once the initial design phase of the learning programme has been completed, it is time to turn your attention to delivering the learning processes involved. This does not mean that the design phase is over. In my experience, an effective programme of collaborative learning in networks will constantly be redesigned throughout the process of delivery – the facilitator is constantly working in response to the needs and local contexts of the individuals, groups and schools involved in the network.

Holding the learning space

My role as a facilitator is to hold the learning space so that the participants can focus on the task at hand. As a facilitator, I pay close attention to the group process and work with the issues that support or could prevent learning. It is important to remember that a facilitator does not have to present the material – you just have to ensure it is taken care of.

Managing the learning process

Learning is a social process and it is central to my role as facilitator to build trust with and between the participants. To enable this to happen, I ensure that the process allows time for participants to get to know each other both professionally and personally. I also work with participants to agree on the group's purpose and ground rules for learning together.

I try to make sure that the group understands how I will work with them. I allow time for the group to reflect on this and express what works and what doesn't. At this stage, it is important to ensure that the facilitator is not projecting his or her own needs on to the group, but rather working from the basis of participants' needs and the agreements made (at the design stage) concerning the working relationship.

How to protect the learning space

As a facilitator it is important to pay attention to protecting the learning space you have created throughout the process of delivering the learning programme. In my experience, the following approaches have proved to be helpful in achieving this:

- working closely with the group dynamics and processes to ensure that all participants can engage in the learning processes
- ensuring diverse views can be articulated and discussed
- making sure no one person (including you as facilitator) dominates the process
- helping individuals and the group as a whole to become conscious of their role and how they can support their own and each other's learning ☐

The competencies of a facilitator

Drawing on my own experience, I have started to identify what I believe are some of the key skills and competencies that facilitators of learning networks need to develop. It is not a comprehensive list; however, I have outlined some of those I feel are important.

Skills

- **Relationship building** – building trusting relationships and paying careful attention to group interaction.

- **Listening** – the ability to listen deeply, with integrity and without judging.

- **Questioning** – the ability to ask various levels of questions at the appropriate moment in order to move the conversation further.

- **Observation** – the ability to read the group dynamics and process and to determine what the next step should be.

- **Teaching** – the ability to teach members of the group skills and new knowledge.

- **Analysis and synthesis** – eg the ability to sum up the discussion, help the group to develop theory and frameworks and to make sense of its practice.

- **Deconstructing learning** – the ability to help the network make sense of its learning at the network level, to help it think about what happened, what worked and why it worked.

- **Reflection** – the ability to reflect alone and with others on individual and group behaviours.

Knowledge

- **Theories of facilitation and models of learning** eg adult learning, learning styles, the three fields of knowledge.

- **Group dynamics** – how to move the network forward if it is stuck, bringing the discussion back to the point, ensuring that groups engage in reflection.

- **Theories of leadership** – each network has leaders operating at a variety of levels, so it is important to understand their different needs.

- **Understanding the challenges** that leaders face – particularly in a learning context.

- **Appreciating the benefits** which collaborative learning can bring.

Self-knowledge

It is impossible to over-emphasise the importance of self-knowledge for a facilitator. While it is important to have a bank of tools and frameworks to use with a collaborative group or network, it is important to remember that facilitation is not a performance. It is about meeting the learning needs of those you are working with. There are times when a facilitator has to draw from deep within and work intuitively because what has been prepared is not working for the network. Knowing yourself and your competencies enables you to do that. □

End note

Facilitation is a complex process influenced by the network's needs, purpose, participants and context. A large part of good facilitation depends on the quality of the planning and thinking that happens before the network meets. It is further enhanced by the quality of the facilitator's skills in listening, observing and questioning during the facilitation process.

Good facilitators are constantly balancing the need to follow the planned agenda, listening carefully to the network's needs and adjusting the agenda where necessary.

Facilitation requires that a person is able to work in a context which is often characterised by ambiguity and uncertainty, where one needs to respond intuitively while keeping the end goal in mind. This requires a person who is in tune with themselves, the people they are working with and their context.

This account presents but one of many perspectives on facilitation. Understanding what underpins your own facilitation style requires you to reflect on what you are doing and to identify the theory that makes sense to you. It helps to have a thinking partner or critical friend who can challenge and support you during this process.

Activating the learning space for collaborative work is a challenging task. For those involved in leadership, facilitation and support roles in school learning networks this is often not an easy path to follow, but it is nevertheless a very rewarding one for those committed to collaborative learning and the many benefits it can bring. □

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