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School Leadership

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

Facilitation within school networks

Building capacity for network facilitation

North East and South West Lancashire Primary Networks

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

Building capacity for network facilitation

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.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who contributed to the generation and publication of these accounts of practice: Michelle Anderson, David Hall, Wendy Harvey, Philippa Kabali-Kagwa, Bill Lucas, Melissa Murphy, Bill Rogers, John Rowlands, Nikki Thomas and John Westwell.

Kirsten Hill and Jasbir Mann
Lead Developers

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. □

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Building capacity for network facilitation

In setting out to illustrate what network facilitation looks like in practice, the following account draws upon the experiences of two networked learning communities which became Primary National Strategy Learning Networks in the north east and south west of Lancashire. It tells the story of their development as school learning networks and points to the significant features of the internal and external facilitation activity which supported this development. The account provides practical illustrations of the facilitation processes, roles and activities involved, and highlights the relationship between internal and external facilitation at different stages of the networks' development. The building of internal facilitation capacity alongside the utilisation of external facilitation expertise features in both networks' accounts of their experiences.

The TOBA network

Starting out

The South West Lancashire Primary Network started out its life as Tarleton, Ormskirk Banks and Aughton (TOBA) Networked Learning Community (NLC). This account sets out the first year of TOBA's journey as a school network. It focuses in particular upon the crucial points of external and internal facilitation that we found made a real difference to the development of the network and its impact on pupil learning across the network's schools.

Three crucial points which we identified as being of particular importance with regard to the development and implementation of network facilitation strategies were at the stages of:

- 1** establishing the vision for the network and undertaking initial planning
- 2** building momentum through detailed planning
- 3** extending participation in network activity through facilitation for action

The importance of establishing a clear, common vision and purpose for school learning networks is well documented. In our experience, the facilitation of this initial stage of network development proved to be vital. In our case, the focus for this facilitation activity was internal and was undertaken by the network's headteachers. It involved getting network members together to engage in a mind-mapping activity to identify the compelling issues of all the schools involved. What was created as an outcome of this work could have been perceived by an outsider as

a muddled mass of thoughts and priorities, but through facilitated discussion, common priorities and a shared direction were teased out. This created a powerful blueprint for future action whereby this approach to working together formed the basis of all consequent detailed planning undertaken by the network.

“ That initial meeting was vital for future developments in that the way we worked encouraged mutual trust and understanding. This in later weeks allowed us to challenge and question each other. ”

Network headteacher

The key elements which we identified as being central to the success of this initial, internal stage of the facilitation process are as follows:

Key elements of the internal facilitation process

- Drawing together members of the network to identify a compelling idea and establish a shared vision for our work. This involved facilitating a meeting of all of the network's headteachers.
- Enabling all network headteachers to see themselves as learners by developing ownership of this vision and idea through the facilitation of a collaborative learning activity. This involved facilitating the mind-mapping exercise.
- Demonstrating emotional intelligence in the facilitation of the process by gaining an understanding of the people involved. For us this was particularly important as previously many of the headteachers in the network did not know each other.
- Generating a shared understanding and appreciation of the particular contexts and challenges of the individual schools involved. This required a facilitation process which enabled network members to embrace the diversity of each of the schools involved, in order that the network could capitalise on this.

Building momentum

The process of detailed planning for network activity initially lay in the hands of the network's co-leaders. In this way, internal facilitation became an important feature of the co-leadership of the network. What did this look like in practice? It was about developing an internal facilitation function which focused on personalisation and dynamism – school visits, telephone calls and face-to-face meetings. This approach valued the input of all schools, ensured ownership of the process and spread the enthusiasm of the co-leaders through personal contact.

External facilitation was invited at this stage, with a facilitator being asked to discuss the detailed approved planning with the co-leaders. This external facilitation involved the following key elements.

Key elements of the external facilitation process

- **Supporting and encouraging** – embodied in a dynamic and enthusiastic attitude which reflected a strong commitment to the network and to networked learning processes.
- **Clarifying meaning** – helping network leaders to clarify their thinking and to establish and develop their understandings about the specific needs of the network.
- **Challenging** – demonstrated through the use of open-ended questions –Why? How? When? – accompanied by effective listening and further high-challenge questions to provoke action.
- **Focusing on data and evaluation** – homing in on network evidence gathering with pertinent questions about baseline assessment and how pupil improvement would be tracked and measured in relation to the network focus.
- **Networking connections** – providing sources of external information, contacts and connections to other networks with similar focus, to ICT links at NCSL and to forthcoming network-to-network opportunities.

The significance of this external facilitation for us as a network was in terms of valuing and creating meaning around our work, challenging our planning and action, and structuring the way forward, especially in relation to assessment of pupil learning.

Facilitation for action

Facilitating the action in our network involved a number of strands of activity. Most notably, this included the organisation of the network's launch event and developing a programme of collaborative cross-school work involving staff and pupils at lower Key Stage 2 (KS2). Both of these activities required a high level of internal facilitation from those in leadership and support roles in the network – although each was distinctive in its demands. The launch conference required the creation and facilitation of a high-profile collaborative learning event involving large numbers of staff from schools in the network. On the other hand, the KS2 project required the development, support and maintenance of a longer-term programme of collaborative work across schools involving a focused group of staff and pupils.

The planning and facilitation of the launch involved certain principles:

- ensuring that the event was led or introduced by a member of the participating schools
- involving protocols and activities gleaned from attendance at NCSL events – diamond nine, action learning, ICT input etc
- arranging an external speaker whose brief was to expand and challenge thinking on the network focus

The extent of internal facilitation capacity required on the day of the launch event was significant. All network leaders had the task of facilitating different tables of network participants. This was facilitation at its hardest: judging response to task; knowing when to intervene or question; listening and knowing when to keep a distance to allow the learning to take place.

Following this, the KS2 network project started with teachers visiting each other's schools and getting to know each other's contexts. At the time, concern was expressed as to whether this was needed – why not move to joint planning straight away? In retrospect, we realised that this preparatory stage was vital, as further down the line it enabled the joint planning and joint delivery of lessons to be conducted in a spirit of facilitated support and challenge. For us, this two-stage facilitated process proved significant in the later success of an ambitious science day involving over 200 children from all network schools in one school building.

Building capacity

Within our network the principle of distributed leadership was enacted through the creation and subsequent work of a network research group. The internal facilitation of this aspect of network activity was characterised by the time, care and status attached to the project. Facilitating the involvement of network participants on this basis crucially involved setting out the parameters of their work and agreeing on the ways in which they would report back. Immediately, we experienced tensions between allowing the group to move forward independently, whilst at the same time enabling the network co-leaders and headteachers to have a strategic overview of their work and direction. Undoubtedly, however, this was distributed leadership in action.

This really brought home to us the importance of developing an internal facilitation capacity within the network which enables network leaders to have an overview of the network's direction and activity, but which at the same time supports others in taking forward a network leadership and facilitation role of their own. Some of the time, this occurred simply by 'leaving people alone to get on with it'. At other times, direct internal facilitation input was either needed or requested. This involved listening, supporting and challenging ideas, plans and proposed actions.

Without doubt, our experience suggests that a very delicate balance needs to be struck with regard to the different types of facilitation required as the network develops. This is particularly the case if the network is to build leadership and facilitation capacity from amongst its internal resources or through the development of partnerships with the local authority and other agencies, in order to ensure the sustainability of the network in the future. □

The Pendle network

Starting out

In the North East Lancashire Primary Network we started our journey as a network as Pendle NLC. Right from the start of the life of the network we recognised the key importance of external facilitation in the development of our network. This was because the headteachers within the network had a longstanding history of collaborative working and so there was little need for extensive internal facilitation at the initial stages. We had an understanding of the individual contexts of each other's schools and had already built up good working relationships and trust between network members.

As a result, it was the external facilitation we received which proved to have the most powerful impact on the network's development in the early days of our existence as a learning community. In particular, the support and challenge which our external facilitator provided in interrogating our network plan was a defining moment for us. It secured the future progress of our network.

“ When our facilitator left there was a feeling that the network plan was still very much ours, but that the discussion had allowed clarification, developed meaning, enabled challenge and had certainly been valued. ”

Network co-leader

The key characteristics which we identified as being central to the success of this initial, external stage of facilitation are as follows:

Key elements of the external facilitation process

- The facilitator is used as a sounding board.
- The facilitator does most of the listening, with network leaders explaining, enthusing and pondering their plan.
- The facilitator supports the dialogue with network leaders and occasionally questions for the purposes of either clarification or challenge.
- The facilitator is able to understand the network's priorities and provides useful information and helpful contacts and connections. □

Building momentum

External facilitation also played a key part in building the momentum of the network by encouraging the wide engagement of staff in network activity across all participating schools. The role of the external facilitator was also important to us at this stage, especially in the following ways:

- **creating** a realisation that we were part of a 'bigger picture' which was really important to us – as a relatively isolated small school community
- **providing** support and encouragement for our work across the network at all levels
- **listening** to what we had to say and acting as an ongoing sounding board for our ideas, strategies and plans
- **giving** us examples of work undertaken in other areas and in other schools and networks
- **opening** up opportunities for further development and links beyond our immediate locality

Another important feature of the external facilitation of the network was through the NLC Network Leadership programme. Involvement in this programme coincided with a period in time when network development was at its most dynamic and effective. Why was this? We would want to highlight a number of reasons, amongst them the following:

- We felt challenged to step out of our comfort zone.
- We were never told what to do – facilitation always allowed our thinking to be extended.
- It was valuable to meet and work with other people in areas with which we were not familiar.
- It widened our horizons as a network.
- We were able to connect with other networks.
- We were able to engage with theory in an accessible way and make links to our practice.

Facilitation for action

The external facilitation we experienced in the Pendle NLC further enabled us to develop aspects of internal facilitation – drawing on the human resources from within the network itself. Discussions with the external facilitator 'made it alright' that initially there was an element of scepticism, even fear amongst network participants about their involvement in and contribution to the wider picture of network development which went beyond their individual schools. It was pointed out that this is not uncommon amongst developing learning networks.

There was also respect for the value which could be added by the diversity of the schools within the network. This helped move network members forward towards a collective understanding that the network could provide a basis for distributing leadership. As a result the facilitation roles required to exchange learning and practice across the network were shared out amongst us.

One example of this was in relation to very small schools that had experienced some difficulty joining in network activities because they felt "*they had little to offer.*" One facilitated session allowed these thoughts to surface, honest discussion to take place, and a shared understanding established that all schools had something to offer. As a result, these schools then became very much part of the network.

Building capacity

In the development of our network, facilitation was pivotal in reducing the perceived isolation of the schools involved. It both challenged and valued the contributions of network schools, and provided access to a national initiative which was inspirational to our network and its development. In addition, building internal facilitation capacity through the distribution of leadership at multiple levels within the network proved to be particularly important in sustaining the network beyond its initial period of funding. The internal leadership and facilitation skills once applied solely for the benefit of the network are now being used extensively by our local authority across the county in supporting the development of Primary National Strategy Learning Networks. □

End note

Although the journeys undertaken by these two networks during the various stages of their development present distinctive pictures of the nature and role of network facilitation, they both have common features. The experiences of these networks underline the importance of both internal and external facilitation roles and of creating a dynamic between them to ensure that ultimately, facilitation capacity is built from within the network and in partnership with others in order to support its longer-term sustainability. A crucial element of this capacity building approach is the alignment of the network's facilitation strategies with the overarching strategies adopted for collaborative leadership and learning within the network. □

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