



National College for
School Leadership

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

Facilitation within school networks

Developing a central network facilitation team

Leading into Learning Networked Learning Community

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

Developing a central network facilitation team

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. □

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Developing a central network facilitation team

The Leading into Learning Networked Learning Community (NLC) is made up of the nine high schools in Blackburn with Darwen, working in partnership with the local authority. The NLC was established in September 2003.

In this account of practice, we explain what we have been learning about facilitation in our school network over its first two years. In particular, we focus on the role of our central facilitation team during this time. We also outline how we expect its work to develop further in the future.

Developing a central facilitation team

Right from the start of the NLC, we have had people with time dedicated to helping the network develop. One co-leader, a local authority consultant, has spent two to three days a week on the work; the other co-leader, a deputy head, has been released by his school for one day a week. This was particularly important early on when thinking and plans needed to be developed.

Also, from the beginning, we planned to go beyond just the two co-leaders and to establish a larger facilitation team. This led to us appointing a communications officer after one year and a research officer six months later. This team now has the responsibility for all the central facilitation activity in the network, and it is their work which is described in the account that follows.

Receiving external support

Members of the central facilitation team have benefited from the support of external facilitators. Very early on in the life of the network we sought the advice of an HEI consultant with a background in professional learning, practitioner enquiry and collaborative partnerships. She provided us with an independent perspective and helped us to draw on the wider knowledge base.

Further support has come through NCSL's Networked Learning Communities programme. In particular, our regional facilitator has acted as a useful sounding board and also encouraged us to stay focused on key purposes. As well as this, the contact we have established with other networks, which was facilitated through the NLC programme, has helped us to reflect critically on our own approach to facilitation.

Leading or facilitating?

In parallel with developing the central facilitation team, the NLC also established a steering group with representatives from each school and the local authority. Our expectation is that this group will become a more formal leadership group that sets direction, reviews progress and evaluates outcomes. Within this context, we believe that our network 'co-leaders' would perhaps be more appropriately named 'lead facilitators'.

The role of the team

The role of the central facilitation team has evolved over time. At this point, we have now come to understand the role of the central facilitation team as having four complementary elements outlined below.

Four elements of the role of the facilitation team

- 1 developing and communicating vision
- 2 initiating and supporting learning activity
- 3 enhancing communication and knowledge flow
- 4 negotiating and securing resources

As well as these elements of our role, the team has also performed a further important function. We believe that we have come to represent the emerging identity of the NLC. As we have worked with people, it has become clear to them that we are working on behalf of a new partnership, not just for our school or for the local authority.

As the network further develops, we would expect that the team's role will continue to evolve. What follows contains something of what we have learned about the facilitation of a school learning network so far. □

Developing and communicating vision

As we began the work of facilitating a network of schools, it was clear that our long-term goal was one of cultural change. We realised, therefore, that a key part of the central facilitation team's work would be to help to develop, communicate and refine a shared vision for the NLC. This was something that could only happen through dialogue with others and would need to be an ongoing process.

Clarifying our own thinking

We have learned that it is important as a facilitation team to spend time regularly clarifying the vision for our NLC. Especially when we first started, we took some time over identifying our core values, such as the importance of learning from each other and on behalf of others. We also considered how we might best communicate these principles. Later, as ideas were tested through conversation and in practice, we continued to refine and update the strategic vision.

The importance of conversation

We now believe that the medium of conversation has been the most effective way for us to share and adapt the developing vision of our NLC. As a team, we have engaged in numerous conversations with individuals and groups across the community.

Whether with headteachers or support staff, whether within schools or the local authority, conversations have allowed us to do several things at once:

- to understand more about different people's working contexts
- to learn more about their values and aspirations
- to share what we have been hearing from others in the community
- to convey something of the emerging vision, both the big picture and practical ways forward

Presentations, papers and publicity

As well as conversation, we have used other approaches in communicating the vision. We have made presentations to various groups, either following a request or because we believed it was important to communicate to them at that time.

When more complex ideas or strategies need to be communicated, we have written position papers outlining our thinking in order to stimulate discussion amongst targeted groups.

Finally, we have used various publicity tools as another way for our vision and values to be communicated to a wider range of people, both within the network and beyond. This has included a website, our own 'brand' and various straplines. We expect to develop these further to include posters, leaflets and postcards.

Through all of these processes, we hope that the vision that has been developed is open to debate and challenge, and that it will continue to evolve as the network matures. □



Initiating and supporting learning activity

At the heart of the NLC's purpose is the desire to improve learning for everyone – for pupils, for adults, for leaders. As a central facilitation team, we have learned that our role in supporting networked learning has different dimensions.

Initiating new forms of learning

We want to see new approaches to professional and pupil learning being used across our network. This has meant that sometimes we have made the decision to set up a new learning group which we can shape and use as a model of new ways of learning and working together.

For example, early on we established a leadership learning group for leaders of professional learning (CPD co-ordinators). This allowed us to develop a pattern for leadership learning forums which has then later been adopted by other groups in the network. For further details of this approach to facilitating leadership learning see:



Leadership learning forums; a new way of learning together at www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla

Nurturing emerging learning groups

We have also learned that we do not need to initiate every new learning group or activity. We increasingly find that people will approach us to say that they want to start a networked learning group and would value our support. In these cases, we see our role as sharing successful approaches and offering as much practical support as possible.

For example, a science technicians group is just being established. We were able to suggest ways of running the group and to encourage connections with the existing ICT technicians group. We expect that as a culture of networked learning becomes more established there will be more examples of these self-initiated learning groups.

Influencing existing groups

We have also recognised that there is a role for the team in relation to network groups that existed prior to the establishment of the NLC. Initially, it seemed important to listen to group members about how their group has functioned and how effective it has been. We have then offered support perhaps in communications or knowledge management, or just by making more people aware of the group's work. Also, as these groups see different approaches working well elsewhere, they become ready to adopt new ways of learning together themselves.

Supporting leaders and facilitators

As the amount of network activity has expanded, it has become clear that the central team will need to focus increasingly on providing support for the various leaders and facilitators across our NLC. This could include sharing effective professional learning processes, offering communication and knowledge management strategies and securing appropriate resources.

For example, we have produced a handbook and organised a forum for all the leaders of our subject learning communities. We have also set up a support group for the facilitators of our lead learners groups. As knowledge about effective network facilitation and leadership develops further within our NLC, we will seek to distribute it widely. □



Enhancing communication and knowledge flow

Within a learning network of schools, it is vital for people to be able to connect with each other and have access to each other's knowledge. As a facilitation team, we have learned that part of our role is to make communication and knowledge flow as easy as possible. Again, this has various elements to it.

Making connecting easier

We want it to be easy for the right people to be able to contact each other as they seek to work and learn together. At a basic level, this means ensuring that contact lists are issued for all our learning groups. The next stage is for us to have a good understanding of who's who within the community. This has been done by discussing staff lists with senior leadership in the schools. It allows us then to connect people more easily when new learning opportunities emerge.

At a later stage, we would hope to make that information available in appropriate ways to all members of the NLC, so that they can initiate connections for themselves. However, actually making contact with people in other schools can still be a problem, whether by phone or email. As well as this, for many staff, contacting colleagues in other schools is still not an ordinary part of their working life. We have recognised that we still have some distance to go in bringing about cultural change in this area.

Making learning activity public

Even when communication is good within a particular learning group, we believe that further communication to a wider audience is also important. Members of learning groups may go back to school and talk about their network activity, but this does not happen consistently, or necessarily reach all the interested parties.

This is why, as a central facilitation team, we have tried to develop ways of making all of our learning activity as public as possible. Using a combination of targeted newsletters, our global newsletter, the website and posters, we have sought to promote the work that is taking place within the NLC.

We believe this will make it easier for people to both participate in networked learning and connect with people who have knowledge to share. For further details of this approach to facilitating network communications see:



Leading networked communications; how do you do it? at www.ncsl.org.uk/wawla

Developing knowledge exchange tools

We believe that much of the knowledge we need about improving learning already exists amongst members of our NLC. The challenge we face is to establish simple processes that make relevant knowledge exchange possible.

As a team, we have developed a knowledge exchange prompt sheet that has been used successfully by learning groups. We have also sought to gather as many knowledge exchange processes as possible and communicate these to leaders and facilitators across the NLC.

Developing new knowledge products

The easiest way for professional knowledge to be exchanged is through dialogue between interested parties. However, we have also recognised that it is important to find ways of presenting knowledge that people can access in other ways.

This has included the use of web-based action learning reports, practitioner enquiry write-ups on CD, case studies, newsletters with updates and information, and meeting summaries. However, as a central facilitation team, we continue to try and find forms of knowledge product that are both manageable for people to produce and accessible for people who want to use them. This may lead us to explore the extended use of a variety of different media in the future. □



Negotiating and securing resources

In order both to initiate and then to sustain the work of the NLC, we have learned that a variety of resources is needed by members of the community. As a central facilitation team, we have seen it as our role both to initially negotiate and later to secure these resources.

Time

Not surprisingly, the most sought-after resource is time. People need time to come together, time to think and reflect, and time to apply what they have been learning. We recognised that in order for there to be a significant breakthrough in networked learning activity, time would need to be protected in some way.

Through negotiation with headteachers, it was agreed to trial the use of 12 networked learning time 'twilight sessions' over the course of a year – six of these to support our subject learning communities and six to support our teacher leadership learning community. This did indeed lead to greatly increased levels of participation in networked learning. However, we recognise further thinking has to be done around the use of time both at network level and school level.

Finance

We have learned that finance has been a key catalyst in establishing the NLC. It was important that external support was matched by internal funding, as this has led to greater accountability about how money is used. We have used the money strategically to establish the central facilitation team and to support the various actions described in this account. We have also been able to support innovative learning processes, for example through our action learning bursaries programme.

As sustainability is a goal for us as an NLC, the team has also begun to consider how to secure the necessary finance for the future. Part of this involves understanding and presenting the real cost of current work to our network leadership. We need to make clear both artificial costs and any hidden costs. □

End note

Recognition and accreditation

Much of the success of a network of schools rests upon the voluntary contribution of its members. Given this, perhaps the most important thing that we need to ensure that the NLC provides is appropriate recognition for the work done by its members on behalf of others.

As a central facilitation team, we have sought to offer our appreciation to people through a variety of means. Public thanks and celebration events are part of this. Promoting people's work in our newsletter and beyond the NLC is another form of recognition. More recently, we have been seeking partnership with other bodies in order to secure accreditation for people's work. All of these together convey that work is valued and makes a difference. □

What are we learning about...?

The seven titles in the series focus on:

What are we learning about...?

- 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

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Networked Learning Communities

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