NCSL National College for School Leadership

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Account of practice

What are we
learning about...?

Facilitation within school networks

Facilitating the transfer of practice in networks

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

Facilitating the transfer of practice 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

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.

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ISSN 1749-7353

Facilitating the transfer of practice in networks

This account of practice draws on experiences of network facilitation from a range of sources including:

- research undertaken in networked learning communities
- work with groups of schools in local authorities and in Excellence in Cities clusters
- national research projects with other school learning community initiatives

It helps to show the ways in which successful school learning networks have approached facilitation. In particular, it attempts to respond to three practical questions concerned with the processes of facilitating networked learning and development with groups of schools:

1 How do you spot compelling ideas?

2 What do you need to know about how people behave in groups?

3 How can you imagine different practice?

Facilitating the transfer of practice is recognised as a key skill and function of all those involved in leadership and facilitation roles in school networks. In this account, the focus taken in responding to each of these three questions is on the role of the facilitator in helping to support learning networks in spreading good ideas.

How do you spot compelling ideas?

Schools across the country have been working together for many different reasons. But if this work is to be sustaining for participants it needs to offer the hope of improving the learning of pupils. Working in education today means that you are faced with any number of important and sometimes conflicting ideas about teaching and learning. As a result, school learning networks need compelling ideas and a shared vision in order to ensure that their participants are intrinsically motivated to become involved in them over a period of time. When these ideas occur and when network members are able to buy into them collectively, they can act, as Malcom Gladwell (2002)[1] describes, as a 'tipping point'. Often they take off and become an epidemic.

In school networks good examples of this process have included the following:

- the growth of interest in the ideas related to Assessment for Learning
- the use of circle time
- the concept of accelerated learning
- the development of thinking skills
- the use of Philosophy for Children
- the concept of building learning power
- approaches to pupil voice and pupil involvement

Facilitation, whether provided by someone internal or external to the network, has played an important role in helping school networks to spot compelling ideas which

Three characteristics of compelling ideas in school networks

1 They are simple.
Compelling ideas can easily be described over a cup of coffee in the staffroom in such a way that they engage the mind. For example: if you use specific written feedback instead of marks or grades, pupils' examination results tend to get better.

2 They are enduring.
Compelling ideas are likely to be true tomorrow and not prone to short-term political need or intellectual whim. For example: you can teach pupils how to learn – learning is learnable.

3 They are powerful.
Compelling ideas, if adopted, will bring about radical change for the good. It is clear to anyone that the idea acts as a gear, clearly contributing more improvement than other possible interventions. For example: you can teach strategies which help pupils to motivate themselves to learn. □

[1] *Gladwell,* M, 2002, *The tipping point; how little things can make a big difference,* Little, Brown & Co

What do you need to know about how people behave in groups?

We know that effective facilitation requires networks to utilise collaborative learning processes. But how do networks ensure that they use the considerable knowledge which exists about how people behave when they are in a group, in order to get the best from their members? Human beings are social animals. They thrive by teaming up with other people. But they also have personal needs which can sometimes conflict with a requirement to be part of a group. The practice of facilitation in learning networks has shown the benefits of using three practical approaches to overcome this tension and ensure that collaborative learning and working are productive for all concerned. The three approaches are described below.

Dealing with status behaviours

Status for adults derives from all sorts of sources – wealth, hierarchical position, gender, age, size, appearance and so on. In any school network, some individuals perceive that they have higher status than others. It could be a long-serving headteacher, an experienced senior adviser from a local authority, or a newly qualified fast track graduate.

It is often the case that in groups without a facilitator, those who perceive themselves to have higher status tend to get more air-time. Their opinions are often weighted as having more importance. They sometimes take control of group processes, assuming that it is appropriate to 'do it their way'. Facilitators can tackle this situation by a number of means, including:

- establishing that everyone's opinions have equal status within the group
- minimising the effects of those individuals who try to pull rank
- having a number of strategies for dealing with status behaviours, including being explicit and directive about the roles to be played by different members of a group

Facilitators have found it helpful to spot such behaviours early on and develop their own specific ways of dealing with them. This may involve either encouraging or deliberately minimising the impact of participants' contributions by being explicit about the roles required of individuals at different stages in collaborative tasks. Most facilitators also need to call on their interpersonal skills and sense of humour in such situations.

Recognising individual learning styles

There is a well-established literature on learning styles which accounts for the kinds of preferences we all exhibit as learners. A good example of this is the categorisation of learning styles developed by Honey & Mumford (1986)[2].

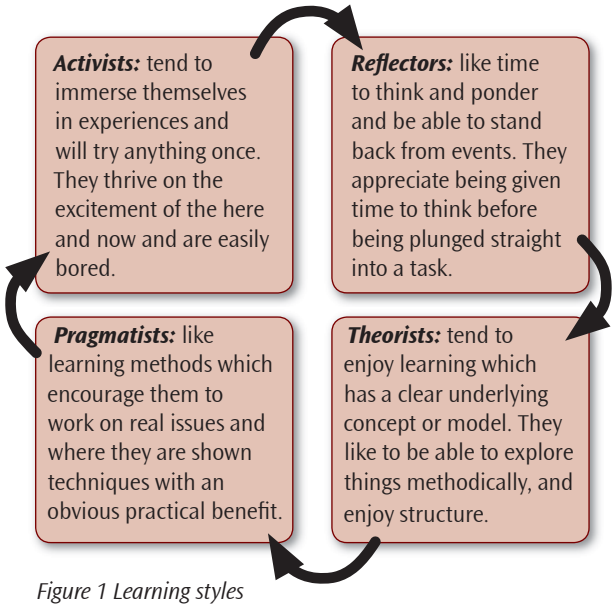

Figure 1 Learning styles

Completing learning styles questionnaires can be a useful means of helping network participants to:

- respect each other's preferences
- see the value of using different methods and approaches
- learn to adopt different styles in their own learning.

Learning styles are often most apparent when people are working in groups together. Activists tend to jump to their feet to try something out, where reflectors will still be mulling over the instructions. Theorists are often reluctant to embark on an activity until the point of it is clear and the proposed method has been justified. Pragmatists tend to adapt to the circumstance in which they find themselves. Facilitators can embrace the issue of learners' preferred ways of working by:

- being aware of these different learning styles
- being clear about the purpose of any activity and explaining their choice of method
- offering choices of methods wherever possible.

[2] Honey, P & Mumford, A, 1986, *Manual of Learning Styles,* Maidenhead, Honey

Supporting group behaviour change over time

Something happens to people as they work together over time, and a number of networks have used the well-known approach to group dynamics originally developed by Tuckman (1965) [3] to analyse their development. This assumes that groups tend to go through various stages in which the characteristics of their behaviour are very different.

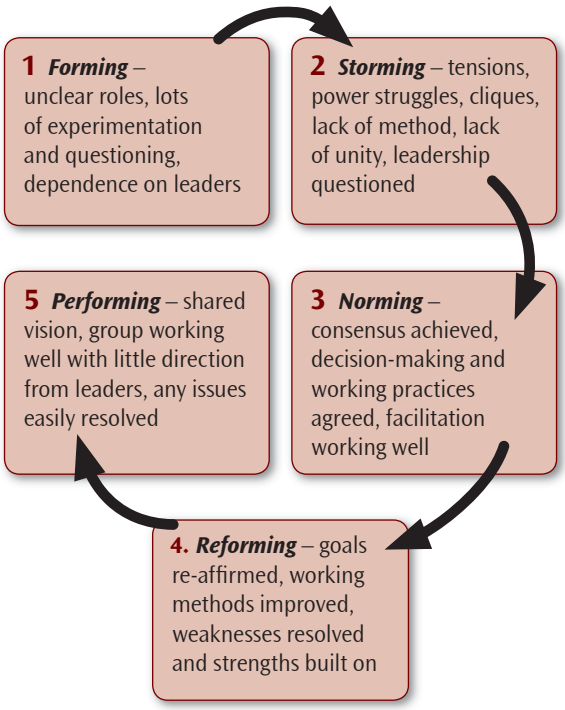

Figure 1 Stages of group development

In dealing with the facilitation of network groups at these various stages of development, the following approaches have been found to be effective:

- establishing clear ground rules to ensure that the forming, storming and norming stages are short-lived
- helping the group to realise that the stages they are going through are commonly experienced by other groups
- ensuring that, as they mature, groups are supported and enabled to reach the performing stage.

How can you imagine different practice?

In what ways are collaborative learning processes different from the professional learning that most network practitioners have experienced over the years? What kind of planning and which types of 'scaffolding' help individual network members to step out of their current habits of mind so that they can imagine different futures?

Many networks have found that it has taken time to move away from being instinctively competitive to collaborative by nature, especially in situations where there is still competition for pupil recruitment. Schools have sometimes found it difficult to step out of their current situation and imagine a future which is different, especially when they are expending huge amounts of energy in trying to get the present right. The following approaches have been found to be helpful in facilitating the processes required to bring about this sort of culture change in the working practices of those involved in school learning networks.

Network activists

In school networks it has increasingly been the case that skilled education professionals and school leaders who care passionately about an aspect of their practice have been enabled to share their knowledge with others. For many network activists this has involved running shared professional development sessions in network schools or facilitating collaborative workshops at network meetings. These activists have managed to share their vision of the future by showing just how much can be done from within the network's collective knowledge base and with the wealth of ideas which their collaborative work has generated.

In many cases, network activists have proved to be a powerful force for generating a culture of collaborative working practices in school networks. This is particularly evident where they have been part of a research project benefiting from input from a Higher Education Institution. In such projects there have also been opportunities for network members to develop their own research skills as they explore the possible advantages of different practices. The role of the facilitator here has been to plan and orchestrate learning opportunities for network activists in ways which ensure they are both supported and challenged in their research and enquiry work.

[3] Tuckman, B, 1965, Development sequences in small groups, *Psychological Bulletin*, Vol 63, pp 384–99. In K B, Everard & G, Morris, 1996, *Effective School Management*, 3rd edition, London, Paul Chapman Publishing Ltd

Critical incident review

Sometimes it takes a deliberate act of collaborative reflection on practice to enable education practitioners to see a different future by extracting new meaning from their current reality. Critical incident review is a tool which has been found to be useful in this regard. Keeping a written log of significant incidents which arise in the course of day-to-day activity in the network can be a helpful way of surfacing professional practices and providing a basis for shared reflection for future action.

With careful facilitation, collaborative working groups enable participants to share the outcomes of their individual reflections with a colleague in their school or with other members of their network. After initial thoughts have been disclosed, participants then offer their own comments and consciously explore the implications for their own practice. Schools have found this to be a useful way of imagining different practice, while at the same time being rooted in the world of the here and now.

Encouraging the establishment of secure and trusted critical friendships amongst network participants is a key task for the facilitator in supporting this process of collaborative reflection. The facilitator role is to ask questions, make tentative summaries and check understanding.

Sometimes it takes the perspectives of others to provoke and inspire us to look at our world with fresh eyes. Facilitators frequently take on this role. However, through the facilitation of collaborative reflection using the critical incident technique, it is network participants who are charged with the job of helping each other to see their practice from a different perspective and imagine their practice differently in the future. □

End note

Facilitation and facilitators are being used more and more in school learning networks. Effective facilitation can open up the learning space in which the ideas and practices of network participants can be given free rein. Encouragement to take risks, try out new ideas and reflect on professional practices are all components of effective network facilitation. By choosing appropriate facilitation protocols to foster collaborative learning, effective network facilitators enable those in school networks to concentrate on the substantive issue of pupil learning and, as a consequence, support the development of more productive, collaborative working practices across the network. All of this is important if network facilitation is to enable good ideas to be spread and effective practices to be transferred from one context to another. □

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