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NCSL National College for School Leadership

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

Facilitation
in action

A development tool designed to explore the
practice of network facilitation in action

Facilitation in action

This development tool has been designed to provide a way for individuals and groups in networks to explore the practice of network facilitation in action. It provides a framework for identifying, analysing and reflecting upon facilitation purposes, processes and protocols within four defined areas of activity.

1 The facilitation of network development – generating a shared focus on pupil learning by drawing network members together around a compelling idea and supporting professional development and leadership learning at all levels.

2 The facilitation of networked learning – utilising collaborative learning processes which optimise opportunities for learning from, with and on behalf of one another, at the school, network and system levels.

3 The facilitation of networked enquiry – developing collaborative approaches to enquiry which generate network data intelligence and collective knowledge about professional practice and the leadership of learning.

4 The facilitation of network knowledge creation and transfer – brokering the blending of knowledge from theory and practice with the creation and communication of new knowledge derived from collaborative work.

This development tool also aims to enable participants to examine the specifics of the role of the network facilitator in each of these domains of activity.

Acknowledgements

Network facilitation roles

- **Developer** – identifying needs, active listening, deep questioning, planning for and understanding barriers, creating a focus on pupil learning, supporting leadership learning.

- **Networker** – making connections, optimising opportunities, reaching out to all stakeholders, understanding group dynamics, utilising suitable networked learning processes.

- **Enquirer** – planning activities, reflection-making, focusing discussions, promoting joint working through collaborative enquiry and the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation.

- **Knowledge broker** – purposefully blending theory and practice, brokering opportunities for creating and sharing new knowledge derived from collaborative work, encouraging artefact creation and exchange.

The development tool enables participants to apply these frameworks in exploring the practice of network facilitation through the analysis of real examples of facilitation in action in school learning networks. By focusing on a selected account of practice, participants are encouraged not only to analyse the key elements of facilitation in action within the particular network example given, but to reflect upon the implications of this for facilitation within their own networked context. It aims to encourage a sharp focus on the component parts of network facilitation and promote shared reflection amongst network participants about the practice of facilitation in their situation.

The tool will be useful for those involved in leadership, facilitation and support roles in school learning networks and others interested in exploring the practice of network facilitation. It can be used as a way of engaging individuals acting in a formal or informal facilitative role within or across a group of schools in a learning network, or as a means of involving network participants in a consideration of the sorts of facilitative activity they might want, need or expect in their particular network context. □

Facilitation in action

Activity guidance

1 Individual activity

10 mins

- Invite participants to read the account of practice provided, individually and in silence.

- Ask them to identify, as they read, the key facilitation actions or interventions illustrated in the account, highlighting them in the margin and briefly summarising in the 'Pause for thought…?' box provided at the end of the account.

Notes…

✔ Distribute a copy of the account of practice detailed on pages 6–9 to all individuals in the group.

2 Paired conversation

15 mins

- Working in pairs – or triads if more appropriate to the numbers of your group – ask participants to share the facilitation actions they have identified.

- Ask them to create a collective record on Post-it™ notes of each of the key facilitation actions or interventions identified.

Notes…

✔ Ensure that all groups have a supply of square-shaped Post-it™ notes or similar self-adhesive cards.
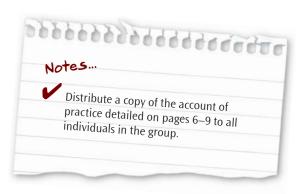
3 Small group discussion

20 mins

- Bring participants together in groups of four – or six if you used triads in part two of the activity – and ask them to classify the specific examples of facilitation in action recorded on their Post-it™ notes, attaching them under the relevant category headings on the base board provided.

- Ask participants to be prepared to discuss the issues raised by this analysis in the plenary.
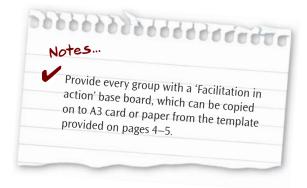
Notes…

✔ Provide every group with a 'Facilitation in action' base board, which can be copied on to A3 card or paper from the template provided on pages 4–5.
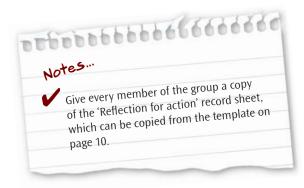
4 Whole group plenary

15 mins

- Individual reflection – ask participants to take five minutes to complete the 'Reflection for action' record sheet, identifying issues of significance for facilitation in their networked context.

- Shared reflection – ask participants to share the issues raised both by their group analysis of the network example and their individual reflection on facilitation in their networked context.

Notes…

✔ Give every member of the group a copy of the 'Reflection for action' record sheet, which can be copied from the template on page 10.

Facilitation in action – base board
Photocopy these pages on to A3 card or paper.

The facilitation of network development

Generating a shared focus on pupil learning by drawing network members together around a compelling idea and supporting professional development and leadership learning at all levels.

Developer

identifying needs, active listening, deep questioning, planning for and understanding barriers, creating a focus on pupil learning, supporting leadership learning

The facilitation of networked learning

Utilising collaborative learning processes which optimise opportunities for learning from, with and on behalf of one another, at the school, network and system levels.

Networker

making connections, optimising opportunities, reaching out to all stakeholders, understanding group dynamics, utilising suitable networked learning processes

The facilitation of networked enquiry

Developing collaborative approaches to enquiry which generate network data intelligence and collective knowledge about professional practice and the leadership of learning.

Enquirer

planning activities, reflection-making, focusing discussions, promoting joint working through collaborative enquiry and the processes of data collection, analysis and interpretation

The facilitation of network knowledge creation and transfer

Brokering the blending of knowledge from theory and practice with the creation and communication of new knowledge derived from collaborative work.

Knowledge broker

blending theory and practice, brokering opportunities for creating and sharing new knowledge derived from collaborative work, encouraging artefact creation and exchanges

Account of practice Photocopy these pages

The following account of practice draws upon the experiences of two networked learning communities which have recently become Primary National Strategy Learning Networks. 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 TOBA network

Starting out

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 which the network undertook.

❝ *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:

- **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 facilitation activity involved the following five key elements.

1 Supporting and encouraging – embodied in a dynamic and enthusiastic attitude which reflected a strong commitment to the network and to networked learning processes.

2 Clarifying meaning – helping network leaders to clarify their thinking and to establish and develop their understandings about the specific needs of the network.

3 Challenging – demonstrated through the use of open-ended questions – Why? How? When? accompanied by effective listening and further high-challenge questions to provoke action.

4 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.

5 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.

Account of practice Photocopy these pages

The Pendle network

Starting out

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:

- 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 five ways:

1. **creating** a realisation that we were part of a 'bigger picture' which was really important to us – as a relatively isolated small school community

2. **providing** support and encouragement for our work across the network at all levels

3. **listening** to what we had to say and acting as an ongoing sounding board for our ideas, strategies and plans

4. **giving** us examples of work undertaken in other areas and in other schools and networks

5. **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.
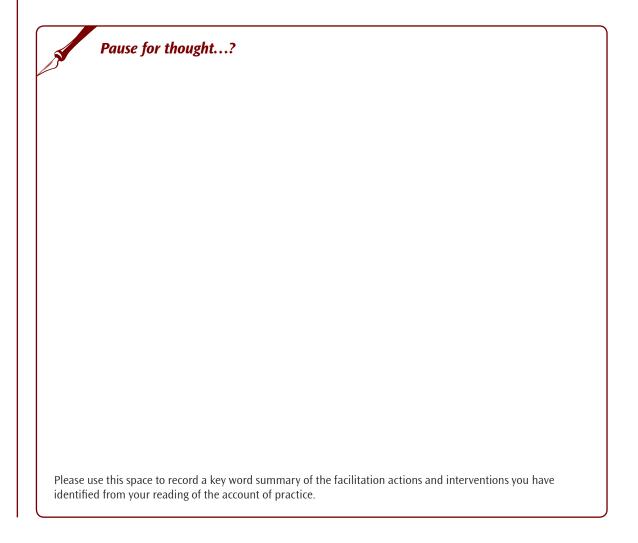
Facilitation for action

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 in 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. □

Pause for thought…?

Please use this space to record a key word summary of the facilitation actions and interventions you have identified from your reading of the account of practice.

Reflection for action record sheet Photocopy these pages

Pause for thought...?

Take a few moments to reflect on the quotation below and on what you have learned from the 'Facilitation in action' activity.

❝ *Effective network facilitation is a combination of leading and following, of guiding and observing, of listening and suggesting, proposing and negotiating, of attending to individual, group and network dynamics, of being 'on the dance floor and up on the balcony' all at the same time.* ❞

Ann Kilcher, 2005

Pause for thought...?

What have you learned about network facilitation?

What are the implications for developing effective network facilitation practices in your context?

What actions will you take to ensure that your learning has an impact upon the facilitation of network development in your context?

Please use this space to record your thoughts and ideas in response to the questions posed.

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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WAWLA/Facilitation within school networks

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