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

Facilitation within school networks

Facilitating network knowledge exchange

A development tool designed to explore
the facilitation of knowledge creation and
transfer in networks

Facilitating network knowledge exchange

This development tool can be used as a way of exploring the dimensions of facilitation activity which particularly relate to the nurturing of knowledge exchange in networks. It is designed to provide participants with an insight into the effective use of learning conversations as a powerful strategy for encouraging shared learning, joint problem-solving and decision-making, and the creation of new knowledge through collaborative work. It provides a practical means by which those involved in leadership, facilitation and support roles in school networks can enable network participants to learn from, with and on behalf of one another in demonstrable ways which support the active transfer of ideas and practice, and promote effective knowledge exchange across a learning community.

The development tool will be useful to network practitioners who have been working together for a period of time and who wish to use conversation to celebrate achievements, explore key drivers for the work undertaken and engage in joint decision-making about what to develop further and what action to take. The tool can also be used by those who are just starting out in a learning network, to create points of connection and engage in shared and democratic learning processes for the purposes of collective knowledge generation and transfer between and beyond network colleagues. □

Facilitating network knowledge exchange

Learning conversations

We know from classroom practice that learning is enhanced when there is an atmosphere where everything is open to question and questioning is the norm. In these circumstances we feel confident to challenge established knowledge, interrogate and experiment with new ideas. We also identify the gaps in our learning.

If we do this, we avoid a talking shop or show and tell, and can experience the learning conversation as a problem-solving opportunity, a collaborative enquiry where participants commit to finding a solution together. By framing the facilitation of learning conversations, the situation can be avoided where discussion amongst network colleagues becomes all talk and no action.

Protocols

When we learn collaboratively, we have to be prepared to share openly what we know and don't know. In these situations it is vital that ground rules for active participation are explored and agreed upon. Attention to protocols is crucial for creating an atmosphere of trust in which colleagues can speak openly and honestly, so that practice can be reformed, refined and transformed.

You will want to think about who will act as your learning conversation facilitator. This is not someone who is going to exercise control over the conversation, but someone who will be responsible for guiding the group within the agreed protocols and through the initial stages of its life.

Facilitators deliberately move the focus of the conversation into areas of uncertainty, of choice and intuitive judgements, in order to find areas for new learning and action. They will do this by introducing and sustaining, as appropriate, the elements of dialogue that are common to all learning conversations.

The facilitator seeks to:

- read the dynamics and signs sensitively within a group learning situation
- enable issues or tensions to be surfaced without anxiety
- respect people's willingness to share
- use participants' generosity as a valuable learning experience for the whole group
- define clearly the activity and each stage within it
- segment the elements of a conversation or discussion, the boundaries of which are otherwise blurred
- make clear the differences between talking and listening, between describing and judging or between proposing and giving feedback
- reveal the gaps in the group's learning
- distil learning outcomes

Planning for participation

Preparing for a learning conversation (eg workshop, forum, consultation, hotseat – see page 4 for details), will involve giving some thought to how you plan to encourage participation in your conversation group. The step-by-step guide on pages 4–5 is designed to help you do this.

In facilitating a learning conversation it is necessary to create the right conditions for dialogue which encourage active listening and reflection. It is also a good idea to use open-ended questions which elicit facts, prompt analysis, help to delve into the centre of problems or issues, and encourage reflection upon actions, decisions and beliefs. It is easy to work in the abstract knowing the issues, recognising the complexity of problems, but taking action requires risk, challenge and collaboration with colleagues. With careful facilitation, the outcome of your conversations will be jointly planned and owned, actions which you and your network colleagues can take forward. The planning template on pages 6–7 is designed to help you in facilitating this process.

“ The kind of talking needed to educate ourselves cannot arise spontaneously and unaided from just talking. It needs to be carefully planned and scaffolded. ”

McDonald et al , 2003

Learning conversations – Step-by-step guide

This guide provides a step-by-step overview of the processes involved in facilitating the planning and development of learning conversations as a powerful strategy for nurturing knowledge creation, transfer and exchange in learning networks.

Step 1 – Preparing the ground

Choose a focus. Which aspect of network activity do you wish to share through your learning conversation?

Devise a title for your learning conversation.



Step 2 – Framing the facilitation

Decide on which conversation frame best suits the learning needs of your network group and the focus you have chosen for your conversation.

How will you organise the facilitation of your learning conversation using this frame?

Questions to help focus

- Which aspect of your work deserves appreciation?
- What is the most powerful story you can tell about your work?
- What have you learned that will be useful to others?
- What could you improve or develop further?
- What is a key problem or burning issue for the network right now?
- How can you present your ideas in a way which will enable you to enlist the help of others in moving forward?



Examples of conversation frames

- **workshop:** where the conversation group comes together to share resources and create new ideas and solutions
- **forum:** where the conversation group engages together to create new networked solutions to shared problems through debate and challenge
- **consultation:** where the conversation group comes together to transfer knowledge about an area of learning focus with the built-in discipline of accountability to peers
- **hotseat:** where participants explore their personal learning journey and lessons learned along the way through questions from others

Step 3 – Planning for participation

Plan out how you will encourage participation. What strategies will you use to create the right conditions? What questions will you pose?

Step 4 – Reflection for action

Decide how you will capture the key learning points. How will you ensure this informs future action?

Create the right conditions

- Enact mutual respect and build relationships.
- Explore questions that matter.
- Listen to each other, especially when there are differences.
- Open up practice, making it transparent.
- Develop shared meaning. Reach understanding together.
- Listen for what is at stake behind the issues stated.

Questions to turn talk into action

- The process is designed for action to be taken. How will you ensure this happens?
- The conversation is a precursor to action by the participants. How will you link reflection to action?
- How will you encourage participants to be receptive to change following the conversation?
- How will you enable a process of collective decision-making and collective action?
- How will you support participants to be jointly accountable for acting on these decisions?

Questions to turn new knowledge into transferable knowledge

- Network activities – What did you do?
- What evidence do you have of impact, improvement or change?
- What worked well?
- What would you do differently next time?
- What are the key learning points transferable to others?

Learning conversation planning template Photocopy these pages

Use the template headings to help plan for your learning conversation.

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2. Framing the facilitation

Decide on which conversation frame best suits the learning needs of your network group and the focus you have chosen for your conversation. How will you organise the facilitation of your learning conversation using this frame?



3. Planning for participation

Plan out how you will encourage participation. What strategies will you use to create the right conditions? What questions will you pose?



4. Reflection for action

Decide how you will capture the key learning points. How will you ensure this informs future action?



What are we learning about...?

The seven titles in the series focus on:

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- Establishing a network of schools
- Community leadership in networks
- *'Making mathematics count'* in school networks
- **Facilitation within school networks**
- Sustaining a network of schools
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To order a copy of this publication and others in this series, please email **nlc@ncsl.org.uk** quoting the reference **WAWLA/Facilitation within school networks**

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Networked Learning Communities

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