National College for
School Leadership

What are we
learning about...?
Sustaining a network of schools

Following
the threads

Madeline Church

Following the threads:

evaluation in complex networked environments

The capacity to carry out planned and systematic self-evaluation has been identified as a crucial element of sustainable networks. It is, arguably, the key to understanding and maintaining what is already working, embedding and growing network activity, and adapting the network to take up new possibilities and direction while dealing with potential threats. But evaluation in networks is a tricky proposition. Firstly, evaluation itself is often riddled with jargon and therefore poorly understood by those expected to be able to collect the data on which judgements are made.

Then there is the complex nature of networks: their multiple and interlinked activities and strategies; the shifting nature of authority and leadership in networks; and how they grow and change. Most of us feel daunted by the prospect of doing evaluation that would do justice to our networks.

In this think piece Madeline Church looks at why this is the case: why traditional models of evaluation are not relevant or helpful when evaluating network activity. She also addresses the real need to think of new ways to evaluate progress in order that sustainability is achieved. □

What is 'evaluation'?

As the co-ordinator of a complex network working across cultural and language frontiers, I began enquiring into and writing about these things some five years ago. I started with the question, what kind of evaluation would be useful to networks? I then found I had to look at the very nature of a network, in order to think straight about what needs to be evaluated. A useful opening question for this paper might be: What do I mean when I say 'evaluation'? There are so many different perceptions and definitions of what people mean when they talk about it. So the first step is to get clear about my meaning here.

Evaluation is really common sense. There is nothing hard to understand or even to do when you want to evaluate work. We all do it all the time. We want to know what has value, and then we want to try and say approximately what value it has. There is no science to evaluation, just a reasonable judgement based on what data you have and what the evidence suggests. There are two key things. One is to collect **relevant** data that gives you the broadest possible picture within your constraints. The other is to examine it and interpret it. You look at that data and see what it tells you about the value of the work. Bits of the data combined together add up to approximate evidence of value.

The second point to make is that this paper is about evaluation for the purpose of learning about the work. It is not primarily about evaluation for reporting purposes or accounting for the work to public bodies. This means that the paper is intended to stimulate your thinking about how you capture and talk about the value of the work you are doing within your network. Its purpose is to encourage you to believe that evaluation can help the learning objective(s) in your network, and help your network continue to learn.

The third point is what we mean when we say 'impact'. This is a word used a lot currently, with little real clarity about what we mean by it. Often people imagine that it is all about results. Rather than define impact, I tend to ask some simple questions. Where can you feel and see the effect of the work you are examining? Is it superficial or does it have some lasting power? Can you see that the effect is deep-rooted or could it vanish if one key person leaves? It is the lasting-ness, the depth and reach of the effect that is important here. This is most likely to mean that the work could be sustainable, that it has stimulated or provoked a meaningful change in practice, culture or understanding. This is where we get on to sustainability. Evaluation can tell you a lot about what is sustainable, provided you are asking a few well-thought out, important, often challenging questions. It is also itself a learning practice that can ensure sustainability.

Monitoring and evaluation: the difference

What is the difference between monitoring and evaluation? Firstly, monitoring relates to what you are doing, the activity, the action, the things that get done. Monitoring is about collecting data about the 'what'. It allows you to budget and count.

Evaluation on the other hand relates to the 'why' question. Why are we doing what we are doing? The why question is twofold. It has a past and a future. There are background reasons that inform your decision to act – the social context, the environment, the current performance of your organisations, the learning culture that exists – and there are changes that you hope to see, the future you hope for and want to create. These 'whys' are interdependent and are what you want to illuminate and examine in the process of determining what value your work has.

So evaluation means collecting and interpreting data about the 'why' aspects. Most of us are comfortable collecting data on the 'what' – number of training days completed, number of students passing through the programme – which tells us a lot about how active we have all been. But it does not tell us about the quality of that activity, or what effect it has had, which is really what we want to know. We want to be able to say with approximate confidence that certain effects can be felt and seen as a result of the work we've all been doing. We want to be able to see how the territory has altered in the time we have been working, and what, if any, changes have come about. And we need this understanding and appreciation for our next round of planning, when we should be looking once again at the context and the future – the state of things and what changes we would like to see.

Evaluation, therefore, has a few basic components:

1 asking relevant questions that get into the heart of the 'why' aspects

2 the discipline to keep records of what those questions throw up as responses

3 a willingness to learn from those responses and share them

Thus evaluation becomes a learning exercise, kept as close as possible to the source, and shared as widely as possible through dialogue, communication, critical reflection and innovation.

So, in the beginning there is analysing and planning. This involves a whole series of questions related to 'why' we are thinking about working together on something in a network. What context are we working in? What potential do we have to make a difference? Why do we want to work together in a network? Is this a sensible or effective idea considering the context? What makes us think that by doing it things will change in the way we want? We then make decisions based on our responses to these questions, based on our understanding of how changes come about. We create a joint framework for action.

What we also need if we are to do useful evaluation though, is to create a joint framework for reflection. I still find that what works best is engaging as many of those involved in the network as possible in the process of keeping track of what the effect of the work is. The crucial thing is to think carefully about what kind of information you need to collect to help work out what effect your work is having, on whom, in what context, and for how long. We want to spread the responsibility for this out across the network, and set up straightforward data collection that everyone who is involved can do a piece of. Keeping simple records about important things is the challenge. It is often easier to collect lots of information about things that are easy to measure but are not that important. Remember, everything is approximate, and the data you collect will need your commonsense interpretation.

What evaluation might we want to do in learning networks?

Learning networks are fundamentally about learning. There are two obvious questions we might want to ask when we come to evaluate. Firstly, how much has the quality of the learning changed, and are more people doing more of it? And secondly, maybe more difficult to grasp, is the network as a whole learning enough about itself and its work to keep renewing, refreshing and adapting its work to respond to the context. The first question corresponds to the learning outcomes of the activities of the network. The second corresponds to the extent to which the network is sustainable.

Learning in this context means that all those involved reconnect with what it means to be a learner. Enquiring, evaluating our understanding of things, honing our skills in asking questions and knowing where to look to find things out. Recognising what we don't know. Stimulating our curiosity. Being open to new answers. The reason for organising in a network form is that the looser structure of a network, with its collaborative and cross-institutional nature, will facilitate this renewed excitement about learning. It will create more enquiring learners, value the knowledge that rests in the daily work of practitioners and encourage greater sharing of what we know already and what we find out.

Learning loops and spirals

One of the things we all know is that learning doesn't happen in a straight line. We don't start at the beginning and move neatly along to the end. The same is true of evaluation. We rarely start from the beginning and track things through to the end. We most likely start to look critically at what we are doing after we have done quite a lot of work, been round the loop a few times, and feel the need to stop and reflect. This way we can begin to see if the work is spiralling out, having an effect that goes wider. We can also see better how we might need to refine it. But often we don't have enough information, or data, to help us reflect, because we haven't thought in advance about what records to keep.

How do we build in the kind of loops we need?

A joint framework for reflection acknowledges that the work we are doing is not just made up of doing the activities planned. The work includes reflecting together on where we are, where we've got to and what we need to change.
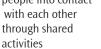
In order to make the most of the considerable experience and understanding built up through the action, we need first to keep relevant records of what is happening so that we can reflect. We need to think hard about what kind of information will be useful to us. What information do we need to record? Over what time frame? Who can collect it? Maybe a few of us involved need to keep simple journals, with a few well-chosen headings. A few might take on the responsibility of getting regular feedback from a small group. And others might want to video or record their work, for others to see or hear and reflect upon.

We then need to ensure the time is allowed for regular (not necessarily frequent) reflection on the data and the evidence. This allows us not just to be 'doers', getting on with the work, but also to stand in critical relation to the work. It will allow us to make small adjustments over time, respond to what we find out, process and feedback, and create a culture of inquiring, adjusting and shaping.

There is nothing new about this. It is what most professionals do all the time. The crucial thing is to make sure that the data collection process fits in with our on-going work, and isn't an onerous extra that places the kind of burden on our working practice which means that it doesn't get done. This is where, in a network, the idea of distribution of responsibility can really help. All participants can be involved in the data collection from the earliest stages. One person can be responsible for a small part of the work of keeping records, while others take on other aspects. That way you have a rich pool of data from which to draw your evidence when you come to examine it and reflect upon it.

Evidence that the network is learning

This process is what I would call a learning loop. Imagine the following diagram as a representation of the way in which a network brings people into contact with each other through shared activities
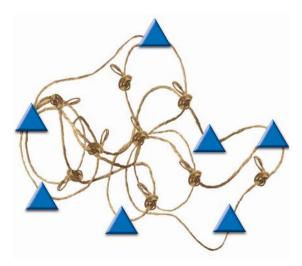

The triangles (people or institutions) are connected together via knots (activities) in the threads that connect them. These joint activities knot people together in a web of relations, creating a network that spreads horizontally, linking work and people together loosely but with enough connection to sustain them. The work they do together creates the trust needed to keep the network alive.

We can also see how those same people engaged in the activities might share out the responsibilities for collecting data about the learning objectives. They then have data that is close to their work on which they can reflect. If this happens around all the knots of activity, and we make sure that people have the opportunity to share what they know, then the network keeps looping its learning round the system.

Remember, the more manageable the enquiry is that people have to do, the more likely it will get done. The more it can be seen to be useful to their ongoing work, the more it will happen. The closer it is to those doing the work, the more they own it and can share it out across the network in ways that keep it alive. And if it becomes part of the practice of the network, it is in itself evidence that the network is learning.

There will then come a time when we want to take a step back and look at all the information and ask, what evidence do we have about the effect of the work over time and space? We need a broader picture, one that tells us about the reach, depth and ownership of the learning. Our understanding and learning will be enhanced if we can bring those involved in each of the knots of activity in the network together. At this point if often helps to have the input of a critical friend, or indeed a group of them, who can help us to look at the data, ask questions about the interpretation we have made, and challenge us to justify what we are claiming.

This may be the point at which people are tempted to bring in an outsider so that they can 'do the evaluation'. There is a widespread belief that only an outsider can be objective, and that in order to do evaluation you must be objective. The crucial thing to remember is that we all have ideas that determine how we see the world and colour our perceptions of what works and what doesn't. No-one is objective. Objective is an attitude of mind, and stems from being prepared to question assumptions, get beneath the surface, and suggest alternative interpretations to the ones that make us feel safe. The best challenge we can have is to be asked good questions about our work that get to the heart of what it means to be learning. ☐

What are we
learning about...?

The six 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**