



National College for
School Leadership

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

Evaluating a culture of collaboration

A development tool designed to help
you analyse, describe and evaluate the
impact of your network activity.

Evaluating a culture of collaboration

Identifying the impact of what you are doing is hard. This development tool is designed to help you analyse, describe and evaluate the effect or impact activity is having in your network. In other words, it helps you to assess what is working, what you need to build on and to identify areas for development and possible innovation.

Measuring how successful a learning network has been on making an impact upon the learning of pupils is often really hard to tie down. The causal link between activity generated by the network and improvements in the output data of those schools is really hard to disentangle from the impact of all of the other things each of those schools might be doing and how those initiatives interplay to make a difference.

Often the work of the network is to create the conditions to make other things possible. Creating opportunities for more professional dialogue within and across schools, drawing teachers together to engage in various forms of collaborative enquiry and opening doors to allow genuine peer-to-peer review between schools are all activities a learning network might engage in. However, there is an often necessary leap of faith for us to believe that in doing so there will be enhanced learning outcomes for pupils.

In that leap of faith between adults engaging together in dialogue about teaching and learning and the impact it has on pupils, one of the things a learning network should do is create the conditions for each of the schools within it to develop as an effective professional learning community.

Bolam and colleagues suggest that an effective professional learning community has:

“...the capacity to promote and sustain the learning of professionals in the school community with the collective purpose of enhancing pupil learning.”

Bolam et al, 2005¹

Learning networks may aspire to create that culture of collaboration, that professional learning community, but how will they know to what extent it has been achieved? This tool is designed to help networks do exactly that. Drawn from extensive school-based research, the exercise allows networks to examine the climate for collaboration in and beyond their school². It can also be used to encourage professional dialogue for evaluating and adapting network activity, focus and objectives. □

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Michael Fielding and Jane McGregor for their contribution to the design, development and publication of this tool.

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ISSN 1749-7353

¹ Bolam, R, McMahon, A, Stoll, L, Thomas, S, & Wallace, M, 2005, *Creating and sustaining effective professional learning communities* DfES Research Brief No.RB637

² McGregor, J, 2002, *Union of Minds: collaborating for success*. In *Employing People in Schools*, December 2002/ January 2003

Evaluating a culture of collaboration

The table at the centre of this activity has been derived from secondary school-based research into adult learning and cultures of collaboration. The terms listed down the left side of the table describe characteristics, or components, of collaborative culture. Across the top of the table the terms illustrate the nature, or extent, of engagement in collaborative culture. These start with co-existence and move through collegueship to collaboration and, finally, to the most sustainable form, collegiality. The table is populated by a number of descriptors to draw out how each of those characteristics might be manifested or evidenced in school contexts.

- 1 Read the table on your own and, as you do, think about your own school.



10 mins

Activity One

- 2 Work down the list of characteristics in the left hand side (ways of working, relationships etc) and, for each one, choose the descriptor (co-existence, collegueship) that best describes your school. Mark your selection on the first record sheet (see page 6).



5 mins

Activity Two

- 3 Choose the one characteristic and description from what you have recorded on record sheet 1 which is most representative of how you think things are in your school. Write them in the first column on record sheet 2 (page 7). Then briefly describe what that looks like in your school in the second column.



10 mins

Activity Three

- 4 Working in groups of three, take turns to share and discuss each pair recorded in activity two. As each pair is shared, listen to the speaker's description of their school. You may also ask questions to get a sense of what each individual in the group feels about the climate of collaboration in their school.
- 5 Agree the key ideas that have emerged from the conversation to share with the wider group.
- 6 Share what you have agreed with the wider group, including the implications for future developments in your school and in your network of schools. □



15 mins



5 mins



5 mins
per group

	Co-existence	Collegueship
Ways of working	Autonomous individuals isolated in privacy of own classroom. Sporadic opportunistic contact.	Giving help and advice when sought. Expertise acknowledged and shared but lack of mutuality between individuals.
Examples of interaction between teachers	Talk Praising / criticising students and colleagues. Talk of social and personal life.	Observation Lend / borrow materials. Defend / explain practice.
Relationships	Individualistic isolation to camaraderie. Can be competitive. Status / roles important.	Initially asymmetric power relationship. Mutuality can develop.
Workplace learning	Limited by insecurity and competition. Problems may be shared but not addressed through talk and humour. Learning is instrumental.	Problems articulated and questions asked on how to solve them with technical assistance and support.
Information and knowledge	Information may be guarded. Personal knowledge remains private.	Information shared. Good practice shared but may not be used.
Conception and rewards	Teacher as hero Intrinsic personal rewards of classroom work.	Teaching the teacher Depends on feelings of competence and psychological cost of accepting help.
Possible relationship to whole-school outcomes	Relatively little impact except through effects contingent on individuals.	May consolidate rather than encourage evaluation of innovation and necessary change.
Possible tensions	External imposition of national curriculum. Increasing influence of 'market' accountability. Competition within new structures.	Role of mentor and the association of giving help and competence may be in conflict with view of self as teacher.
Limitations	Reinforces presentism and conservatism. Does not assist in school-wide learning and development. Does little to reduce teachers' burnout.	Limits development of shared technical culture. Can be narrowly instrumental. Emphasis on hierarchy limits creativity of new ideas

Collaboration	Sustainable collegiality
Mutual assistance. Routine sharing. Open exchange of insights, methods, material.	Collective critical confrontation with a purpose. Contribute jointly to agreed curriculum. Development of professional community. Participation in decision-making on whole-school issues.
Teach each other about teaching Exchange project ideas. Dialogue teaching and learning. Analyse practice.	Planning, designing, putting into practice and evaluating Collectively test ideas. Research work together.
Relate to people rather than roles. Visibility and proximity important. Development of trust allowing challenge.	Group affiliation grounded in social relationships, professional work and common values and aims. Equality with dispersed leadership and flexible roles.
Shared problems addressed. Reflective practice through 'dialogic partnerships'. Hypotheses generated and tested together.	Culture overtly values learning and creates opportunities for it. Development of shared language. Test new ways of acting based on shared experience.
Information becomes knowledge as it is incorporated in practice.	Knowledge creation as whole school process.
Mutual support Extends repertoire of teaching skills increasing competence.	Collective commitment Increases learning and feelings of efficacy. Inter-relationship between school improvement and professional development.
Increasing coherence of curriculum through improved planning and wider range of teaching and learning styles (T&L). Facilitates focus on T&L of individual pupils.	Synergy. Collective and ongoing learning for school staff and students. Values and aims articulated and acted upon. Improved morale and sense of efficacy.
Impact of imposed appraisal schemes. May lead to 'strategic rhetoric' and withdrawal to privacy.	Balance between individualistic and collective action. Micro-politics of school more visible eg via the role of the head. Need to account for conflict.
May not extend to direct commentary on curriculum and methods. Can allow balkanisation of groups and departments. Needs resources, such as time .	External accountability limits decisions participative decision making can be slow. Loss of individual latitude to act on personal preferences. May be contingent on certain types of leadership. Needs resources.

Record sheet 1



Characteristic	Description
Ways of working	
Examples of interaction between teachers	
Relationships	
Workplace learning	
Information and knowledge	
Conception and rewards	
Possible relationship to whole school outcomes	
Possible tensions	
Limitations	

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

Record sheet 2



Characteristic	Description

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

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