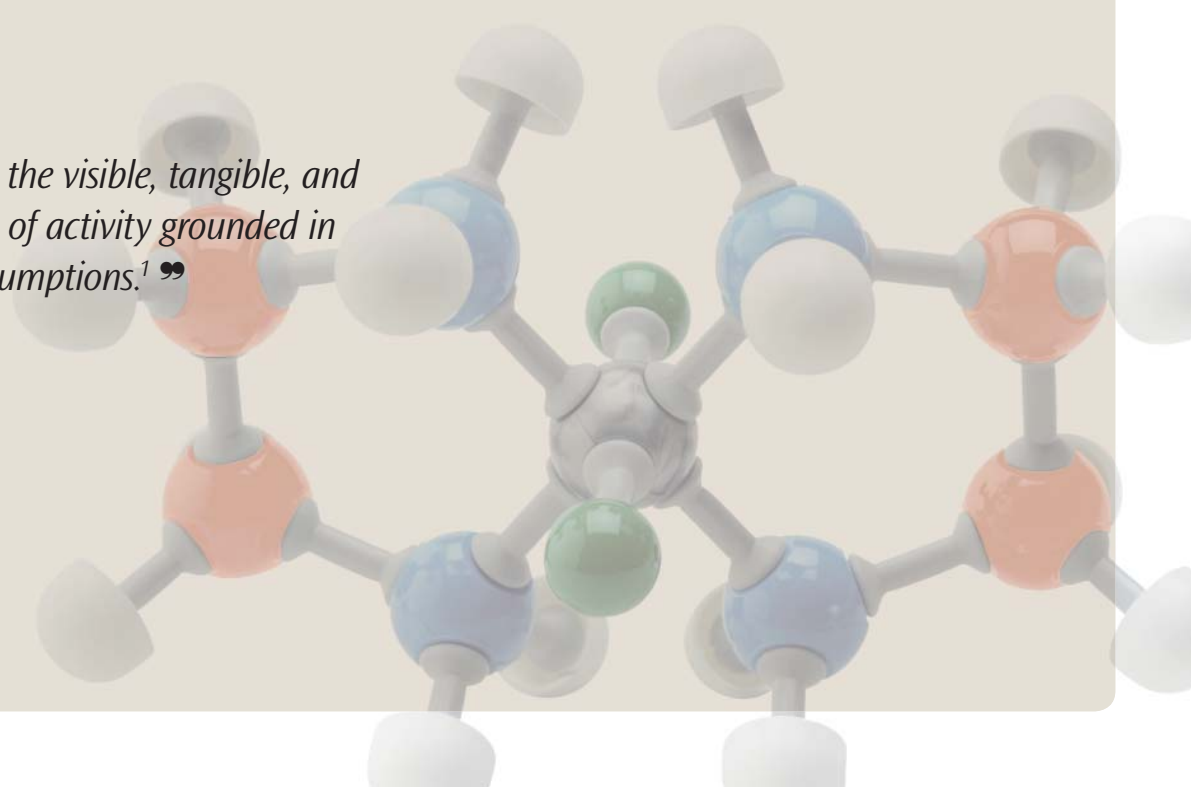# Artefact creation in learning networks

Transferring knowledge, creating solutions, learning together

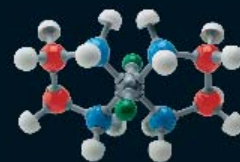" *Artefacts are the visible, tangible, and audible results of activity grounded in values and assumptions.*[1] "

Mary J Hatch

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Artefact creation in learning networks

What is a network artefact?

What do communities of learners produce when they decide to share ideas, work and plan together? Amongst these products are sets of minutes, papers, lesson plans, schemes of work, video material and much more. Network participants and leaders are not short of evidence of network activity: lists of research projects, completed enquiries, intervisitation schedules, minutes of cross-school subject group meetings, DVD recordings of a network conference, or pupil conference presentations. But what does this documentary evidence of activity add up to? In short, these sorts of network products provide evidence of activity, proof that individuals and groups within the network are thinking and working differently, planning for change together. They are a testament to things that go on in network schools every day.

But more than this, evidence of network activity contains implicit information about the culture within a learning community or organisation. Culture in this sense refers not simply to a network's publicly espoused values and principles of leadership and learning. It refers also to assumptions and beliefs that are taken for granted between colleagues in organisational groups (Schein, 1992[2]). Understanding these assumptions and beliefs can be the key to understanding the inner life of the network, and its impact in a range of contexts – learning to learn, developing leadership capacity, and managing change.

For example...

A network might make an overt statement that they value student voice. Their artefact evidence for this might be minutes of all school council meetings, chaired and written by teachers. Another network artefact might demonstrate their shared *assumed* beliefs about the importance of student voice through video material which captures student involvement activities and their impact on decision-making and action within the network.

> ❝ If nobody in the group 'knows' the answer, where do you go to 'find things out'? This is the leap into the culture as a warehouse, a toolhouse, or whatever. There are things known by each individual (more than each realizes); more still is known by the group or is discoverable by discussion within the group: and much more still is stored somewhere else – in the 'culture,' say, in the heads of more knowledgeable people, in directories, books, maps, and so forth. ❞
>
> Bruner, 1996

Examples of network artefacts

Evidence of network activity is often recorded in a range of different documents and products, using a range of different media. These different forms of documentary evidence can also be understood to be network artefacts, each of which has an explicit and an implicit story to tell about the learning organisation or network in which it was produced.

Examples of network artefacts which can be used effectively to celebrate, share and transfer the learning and practice at the heart of your network are listed below.

- multi-media products such as a DVD, CD-Rom, video or audio recordings which capture key aspects of network activity and its outcomes
- print products such as newsletters, leaflets, magazines, booklets or research reports that focus on the work and outcomes of a networked initiative
- presentations or material used in a classroom display or exhibition which capture examples of network activities or processes
- resource-based products such as books, games, activity packs, teaching/learning materials or development tools suitable for use with pupil or adult learners
- online learning resources, web-based products or interactive teaching and learning materials suitable for use in an online environment

A network artefact might be presented in any of these media, but in selecting your best example to share with others outside your network context, you should choose that artefact which represents the most powerful example of learning in your network and has the greatest potential to pass on knowledge or learning about your network activity to others.

Notes

✔ The purpose of artefact creation is to celebrate and share or transfer the work at the heart of the community. The process of artefact creation and interpretation makes visible behaviours and assumptions that can contribute further to our shared understanding of learning, and leading change.

[2] Schein, E H, 1992, *Organisational Culture and Leadership,* Jossey-Bass Inc, California
[3] Bruner, J, 1996, *The Culture of Education,* Harvard University Press, Boston

Artefact creation in learning networks

What is an artefact learner guide?

People working in an organisational or network culture find ways of working and communicating that are often difficult for outsiders to understand. As a result, artefacts emerging from this culture also need to be interpreted: an artefact only exists because of a network's shared, perhaps tacit, understanding of its focus and function. Learner guides, or commentaries, are suggested as a method for providing further information and interpretation which can bring your artefacts to life for others, either to support, or instead of, face-to-face discussion or exploration of the learning captured in your network artefact.

Artefacts should provoke challenge. Your network artefact will reveal a great deal about your network, much of which may be hidden (that is, assumed) by its members. When creating your artefacts and learner guides, you should expect to be questioned about (and therefore will want to consider together) the embedded values and assumptions that you are communicating through your artefact.

For example...

Your network might wish to offer a set of enquiry abstracts as a network artefact. At this stage you might consider what this set of enquiry abstracts tells you about your own network and what it might tell others. It contains explicit information about how a new approach to setting homework impacted in the classroom – and how a group of teachers in one school improved learning experiences for a group of disaffected boys. It might not make so explicit the way that participation in shared enquiry helped to build leadership capacity in that same school. Hidden deeper in this artefact is the knowledge that the network needs to help other schools in the network benefit from the experience of these teachers, and to maintain and build on good partnership working with its HEI.
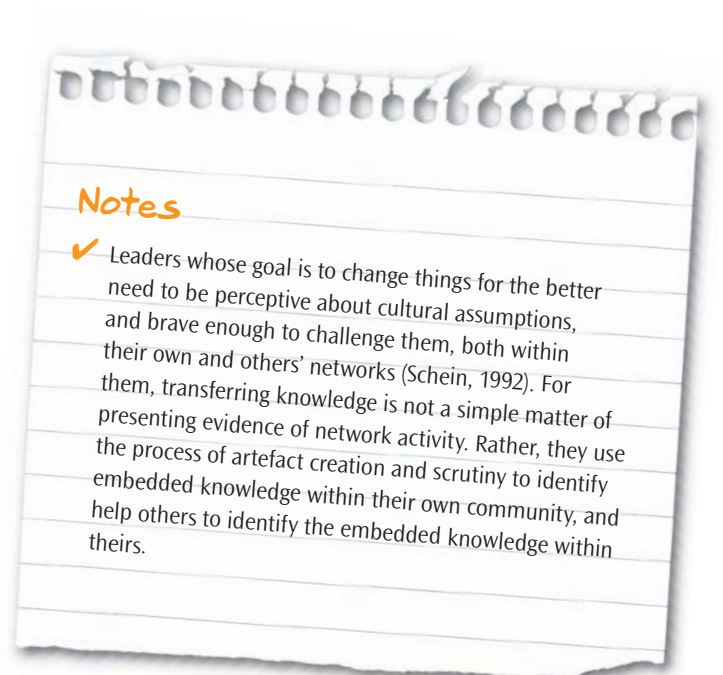
Unless we start to unravel these shared hidden meanings, we will never understand why successful leaders work in the way they do, or improve the way we transfer learning about building capacity and managing change. The process of scrutinising your network artefacts in this way and creating a learner guide commentary will help you and others to do this.

> ❝ The most important message for leaders at this point is, try to understand culture, give it its due, and ask yourself how well you can begin to understand the culture in which you are embedded. ❞
>
> Schein, 1992

Network artefacts make meaning in a complex way. Depending on how we look at them, engage with them and talk about them, they can tell us much more than just what is included in a scheme of work, or the names of individuals who have participated in accredited leadership training. They can tell us about the learned behaviours and processes that exist within our own learning community as well as providing a window to these aspects at work in another learning community.
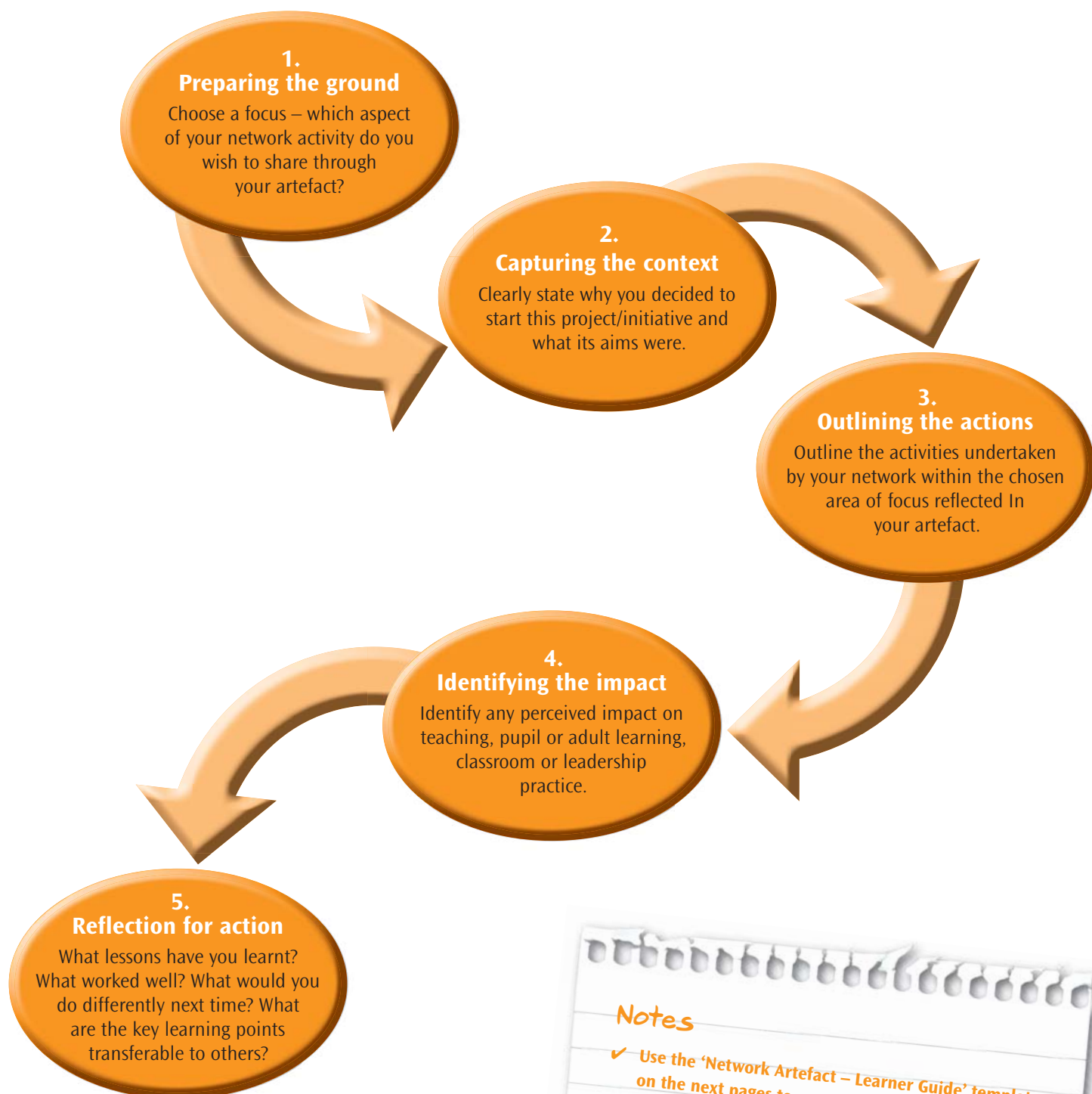
A well-constructed learner guide can ensure that an artefact is able to communicate and transfer to others a network's most powerful examples of learning and knowledge with the greatest effect. The step-by-step guide on the following page provides some guidance on this.

Notes

✔ Leaders whose goal is to change things for the better need to be perceptive about cultural assumptions, and brave enough to challenge them, both within their own and others' networks (Schein, 1992). For them, transferring knowledge is not a simple matter of presenting evidence of network activity. Rather, they use the process of artefact creation and scrutiny to identify embedded knowledge within their own community, and help others to identify the embedded knowledge within theirs.

Artefact creation in learning networks

Creating an artefact learner guide commentary Step-by-step guide

1. Preparing the ground
Choose a focus – which aspect of your network activity do you wish to share through your artefact?

2. Capturing the context
Clearly state why you decided to start this project/initiative and what its aims were.

3. Outlining the actions
Outline the activities undertaken by your network within the chosen area of focus reflected In your artefact.

4. Identifying the impact
Identify any perceived impact on teaching, pupil or adult learning, classroom or leadership practice.

5. Reflection for action
What lessons have you learnt? What worked well? What would you do differently next time? What are the key learning points transferable to others?

Notes

✔ Use the 'Network Artefact – Learner Guide' template on the next pages to create a commentary on a network artefact to share with others.

Artefact creation in learning networks
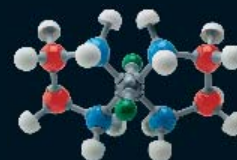
Network Artefact – Learner Guide Template

Use the template headings to create a learner guide commentary on your selected network artefact.
This template is available in an electronic version online at **www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc**

Define the focus

eg Network name, title of artefact. What is the focus of the aspect of your network activity you wish to share through your artefact?
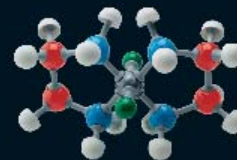
Capture the context

eg Clearly state why you decided to start this project/initiative and what its aims were.

Outline the actions

eg Outline the activities undertaken by your network within the chosen area of focus reflected in your artefact.

Artefact creation in learning networks

Identify the impact

eg Outline any perceived impact on teaching, pupil or adult learning, classroom or leadership practice.

Reflection for action

eg What lessons have you learnt? What worked well? What would you do differently next time? What are the key learning points from this work which would be transferable to others?

Network contact information

eg Name of key contact/s for network, postal or email address, website address, details of availability of network artefact for use by others.

Presentation tips…
To bring your learner guide to life you might want to consider including photographs or other graphic images to illustrate the text. You may wish to include pictures, diagrams, charts or "quotes" from those involved in the network activity which your artefact and learner guide describes.
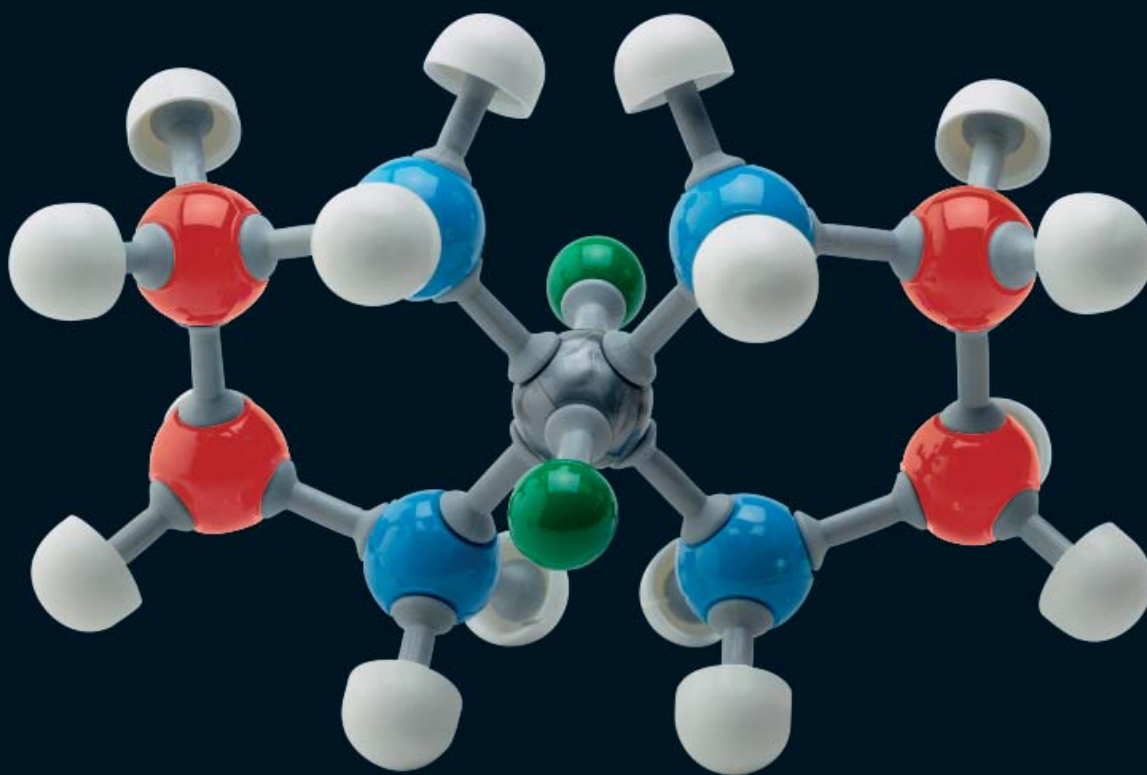
National College for School Leadership