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Learning about HEI partnerships in learning networks

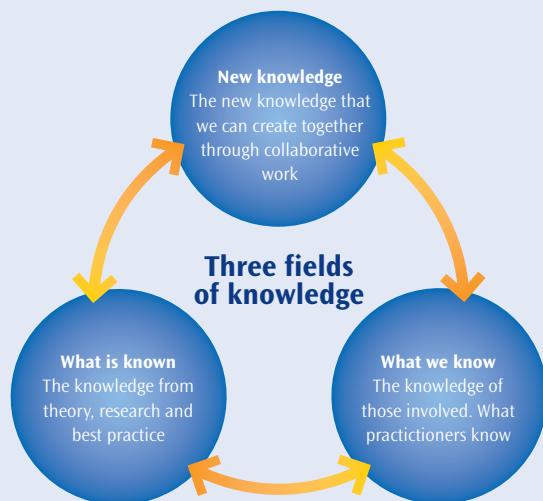


The teaching professional is saying to HEI: "This is what we need. We need research – to tell a story and then make it critical. Research – narrative – reflection – school improvement."

HEI partner

Learning about HEI partnerships in learning networks

During the four years of the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme, clear evidence of the benefits of closer partnership with Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) has emerged. The Networked Learning Group supported learning partnerships between many NLCs and HEI partners and worked with HEIs and teacher education agencies to open up new dialogue about partnership development. This summary draws on research and programme evaluation to describe how learning partnerships worked in practice and how they could flourish in the future.



A historical assumption has been that HEIs were the gatekeepers of the theory and research that could inform best practice. Despite this, a number of factors reduced the effective transfer of best practice knowledge from HEIs to schools and policy-makers. Some of these were able to be addressed through the adoption of the NLC programme's three fields of knowledge model of learning. This model stresses equity between public knowledge (often associated with HEIs as repositories of 'what is known') with private practitioner knowledge and new knowledge (associated with the dynamic realities of classroom practice).

Partnership in enquiry

Many NLCs already had relationships with HEIs. Others began with a far less clear idea of what such a partnership might look like. To begin with, established patterns of working – using HEI staff as critical friends and mentors or providers of traditional continuing professional development (CPD) – tended to shape new activity. However, NLCs were encouraged to undertake collaborative enquiry. Subsequently identified as one of seven key features of a learning network (Earl & Katz 2005), enquiry was an obvious starting point for changing relationships.

Many NLCs chose to participate in enquiry and found it an invaluable stimulus for new leadership opportunities and collaborative working. Unlike more traditional forms of CPD, classroom-focused research highlights the continuum from theory into practice.

Five good reasons for networked enquiry:

1. Using existing research to identify good, innovative practice.
2. The effective use of data.
3. Self-evaluation.
4. Motivating adults through action research.
5. Involving students and others as enquiry partners.

What partnership can do

Partnership produced many benefits. At first these were reported anecdotally, but often, as teachers became more adept in the systematic collection of evidence, they used these skills to structure their responses both to network practice and to public evidence sources.

Five milestones of changing classroom practice:

1. Improved data collection and greater reflection.
2. Inter-school enquiry – often best when based on curriculum subjects and departments.
3. Changing professional self-image and concepts of self as researcher.
4. Enquiry-oriented professional conversations – creating learning communities.
5. Shifting the focus from performance data to 'what works and why?'

Evidence from practice

The University of Nottingham has played a central role in the enquiry work of the Primary Schools Learning Network (PSLN). The university has proved to be a key influence in the development of the network. It has performed the role of critical friend, broker, consultant, facilitator, trainer in research methods, conference organiser and co-author of academic papers. The principal method of building leadership capacity in PSLN has been through a collaborative system of school enquiry groups (SIGs), which have been the main focus of the network's classroom-based enquiries. A key input from the university has been the high quality training in research methods and the support for teachers unfamiliar with conducting research, analysing and writing up their findings.

"I think the role we play that's most helpful is the critical friend role, where a school or group of schools might be conducting an enquiry."

Chris Day, Professor of Education,
University of Nottingham

The Schools University Partnership in Education Research (SUPER) was set up in 1999. It developed out of the interest and support of Cambridge University and a range of existing associations they had with a number of local headteachers. The aims of the partnership were to support practitioner research taking place within and between schools, but also to research the processes and conditions necessary for such research to flourish.

The partnership chose three interconnected and shared focuses or themes:

1. Independence in learning for students and staff.
2. The development of student voice in learning and in the use of evidence.
3. Learning about leadership.

Particular roles and responsibilities to support research and networking activities were established in each of the schools: teacher research co-ordinators, student voice co-ordinators and headteachers. They worked together with critical friends, a network manager and a network research officer from the university faculty. The three shared focuses provided a common structure for the network's research activities, whilst at the same time being sufficiently flexible to be interpreted in ways which were relevant to individual schools teachers and students. The university provided research support, critical friendship to the schools, development of a research culture, financial and co-leadership and administrative co-ordination.

What makes an effective partnership?

NLCs and HEIs adopted different models for their relationships, for example:

- 'asymmetric partnership' – HEIs supporting practitioner research and enquiry
- 'CPD focus' – HEIs offering more limited engagement in enquiry aimed at promoting staff development
- 'symmetrical partnership' – partners working for mutual benefit and knowledge creation

Three routes to compatibility:

1. Established geographical and historical links.
2. Relationships of trust and mutual support.
3. Understanding each other's circumstances and needs.

What works well between schools also helps to foster effective partnerships with HEIs.

Partnership for the future

Truly symmetrical partnerships remain a largely unrealised aspiration. Programme activity promises, however, that the freedom of manoeuvre within learning networks, together with the commitment of a growing number of HEI partners, will effect continued transformation.

Four signposts to new futures:

1. High quality, ongoing CPD based on reflective practice, not skills.
2. Space to challenge 'approved' models and legitimise learning from mistakes.
3. Willingness to create new, more equal relationships – HEIs support and validate school-based CPD.
4. Support for the continuing cycle of research: narrative – reflection – changed practice – improvement.

Further Reading

- Campbell, A, Keating, I, Cockett, K, Kane, I, McConnell, A & Baxter, C, 2005, *An investigation into NLC and HEI partnerships* (Networked Learning Communities and Higher Education Links Project), NCSL unpublished
- Day, C, & Hadfield, M, 2004, Learning through Networks, Trust Partnerships and the Power of Action Research, *Educational Action Research*, 12, 4
- Earl, L, & Katz, S, 2005, *Learning from Networked Learning Communities: key features and inevitable tensions*, Nottingham, NCSL

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