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# Learning about learning networks



*"Learning networks aim to be collaborative, to support learning at all levels, to promote practitioner enquiry, engage with theory and research, develop approaches to continuing professional development, and to draw theory from enquiry into practice."*

Alis Oancea & John Furlong

# Learning about learning networks

There is evidence to suggest that the leadership of purposeful collaboration beyond the school has a positive impact on pupil achievement. Learning networks have been shown to provide a powerful context for building the leadership capacity that this requires. The processes, activities and models which characterise networked learning help to explain what effective school-to-school collaboration looks like when it is learning focused.

## Networked learning activity

Networked learning occurs where people from different schools in a network engage with one another to learn together, to innovate and to enquire into their collective practices. Such activity tends to be purposeful, designed, sustained and facilitated. Unlike 'networking', perhaps, it doesn't happen by accident. Facilitation, active support and brokerage may be required.

Networked learning 'knots' – where people from different schools come together – are the right place to start in planning networks for these purposes. We have identified five types of networked learning 'knot' that are worthy of further study.

### Five types of networked learning 'knot':

1. **Joint work groups** (eg project teams or curriculum development groups).
2. **Collective planning** (eg steering groups, professional development groups).
3. **Mutual problem-solving teams** (eg focus group).
4. **Collaborative enquiry groups** (eg enquiry teams).
5. **Shared professional development activities** (eg learning forums/joint staff days).

Some of these might be seen as being 'architectural' to the network, such as steering groups and learning forums, whilst others are more fluid and adaptive, such as enquiry teams and project teams. Both are important.

There also appear to be four sorts of networked learning 'knots' which reflect types of networked learning activities that are particularly high-yield, both symbolically and practically.

### Four types of high-yield networked learning activities:

1. Launch events and joint staff days
2. Headteacher learning groups
3. A shared professional development planning function
4. A monitoring, evaluation and dissemination group

The issue of dynamic and sustained participation, and its purposes, seems crucial to an understanding of successful learning networks. Answering questions about who participates, why, how, when, for what purposes and for how long, may well provide a useful analytical framework and offer some interesting insights into networked learning.

## Networked learning processes

As we have come to understand it, networked learning entails four distinct learning processes.

### Four processes of networked learning:

1. **Learning from one another** is where groups capitalise on their individual differences and diversity through sharing their knowledge, experience, expertise, practices and know-how.
2. **Learning with one another** is where individuals are doing the learning together, experiencing the learning together, co-constructing the learning, making meaning together. Collaborative practitioner enquiry, or collaboratively learning about recent research are good examples of this activity.
3. **Learning on behalf of one another** is where the learning between individuals from different groups or schools is also done on behalf of other individuals within their network – or the wider system.
4. **Meta learning** is where individuals are additionally learning about the processes of their own learning so that they can replicate it in other situations or with other groups.

Networked learning can be said to take place when individuals come together in groups from different environments to engage in purposeful and sustained developmental activity informed by the public knowledge-base, utilising their own know-how and co-constructing new knowledge together. They learn with one another, from one another, and on behalf of others, both in the network's schools and the wider system.

## Networked model of learning

At the heart of the networked learning models we draw upon in our work lies a recognition of the importance of the social construction of learning, the role of enquiry processes in applying learning in practice, and the need to draw equally upon three fields of knowledge. Within this model of learning, the fields of knowledge are utilised in a dynamic relationship with one another through network-based activity, application and study within classrooms.



## Networked learning an illustrative example

The Networked Learning Communities (NLC) programme, launched in September 2002 by England's National College for School Leadership (NCSL), is probably the largest school-to-school network programme in the world. It is a co-ordinated reform initiative currently involving over 130 school-to-school networks drawn from approximately 1,500 schools. This represents around 6 per cent of schools in the country and involves approximately 25,000 staff and over 500,000 pupils.

Each networked learning community comprises a group or cluster of schools working collaboratively in partnership with local authorities, Higher Education Institutions and the wider community to improve opportunities and raise standards for their pupils. Networks are usually geographically linked – but can be dispersed – and are united by a common interest. The average size of a network is approximately 11 schools, although some are as small as 6 schools and others as large as 40 schools.

### Networked learning design

The networked learning design consists of six strands known as 'the levels of learning'.

#### Six levels of networked learning:

1. **Pupil learning** – around a shared pedagogic focus.
2. **Adult learning** – in professional learning communities.
3. **Leadership learning** – at all levels and including collaborative headteacher learning.
4. **School-wide learning** – involving progressive school re-design around learning principles.
5. **School-to-school learning** – between schools as communities of practice.
6. **Network-to-network learning** – modelling the development of a learning system.

This design is underpinned by four principles.

#### Four principles of networked learning:

1. **Moral purpose** – a commitment to the success of all children.
2. **Shared Leadership** – eg co-leadership and distributed leadership.
3. **Enquiry-based practice** – evidence and data-driven learning.
4. **Use of a model of learning** – systematic engagement with the 'three fields of knowledge'.

These principles underline a commitment to collaborative practice and generosity of spirit – hence networked learning within the NLC initiative has two key mantras. The first of which emphasises collaboration is '*working smarter together, rather than harder alone*'. The second, which represents a critical part of the principle of moral purpose is '*learning from, with and on behalf of one another*'.

## What are we learning about...?

### Establishing a network of schools

***"There is no blueprint for an effective network. No one set of arrangements or one particular type of organisation is necessarily better than another. However, we do know about some things that seem to work."*** NCSL, 2005 <sup>1</sup>

There are now many schools, both in the UK and internationally, that are benefiting from working together as a network. From their experience, and from the range of research that has been undertaken in school networks, it is possible to identify the factors that successful networks have in common.

#### Four things effective networks do:

1. Design around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose and an appropriate form and structure.
2. Focus on pupil learning.
3. Create new opportunities for adult learning.
4. Plan and have dedicated leadership and management.

The NLC programme was designed as a development and enquiry programme to yield learning about what works in school networks. New networks in the UK are now in a position to build from this knowledge-base when designing and planning their networks.

### Local authority involvement in school networks

***"What is clear from the work of NLCs, is that the move to a more collaborative and networked-based system offers a real opportunity for local authorities to co-design with school leaders a transformation of the local landscape."*** NCSL, 2004 <sup>2</sup>

Although local authorities perform many roles and functions in relation to schools, we have been able to identify five distinct brokerage roles through which they appear to be able to add the greatest value to networks of schools. These five roles have been characterised as 'brokerage' in order to distinguish these functions from traditional roles and ways of working.

#### Five brokerage roles for local authorities:


1. Brokering network membership.
2. Brokering network relationships.
3. Brokering partnerships beyond the network.
4. Brokering the network's access to resources.
5. Brokering knowledge-exchange within and beyond networks.

Local authorities are exploring the practice of 'brokerage' within their work – bringing together, supporting and sustaining networks of schools. This involves looking with fresh eyes at the way schools work with one another, the way the local authority works with networks, and the way that local authority services, including but beyond education, collaborate to meet children's needs.

1. National College for School Leadership, 2005, *What are we learning about...? Establishing a network of schools*, Cranfield, NCSL

2. National College for School Leadership, 2004, *What are we learning about...? LEA involvement in school networks*, Cranfield, NCSL





For more information about networked learning communities visit: [www.nlcexchange.org.uk](http://www.nlcexchange.org.uk)  
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Networked Learning Communities

Learning from each other   Learning with each other   Learning on behalf of each other