Linking up for success

It is often proposed that schools will achieve more if they work together than they can alone. The Networked Learning Communities programme has given volunteer schools the chance to put theory into practice. **Dr Barbara Spender** discusses what has been learned from networked learning communities, and offers practical examples of the benefits of this diverse programme

Much of the recent impetus of education has been for a move away from competition towards collaboration. Until now, this has focused on increased partnership between schools. Every child matters (DfES, 2004b) brings the new challenge of creating interdisciplinary teams, working together for the benefit of the individual student and for the communities to which pupils and schools belong.

The idea of synergy – achieving more together than you can alone – is rooted in common sense and personal experience. It is particularly attractive to teachers who see learning as a social activity. Too often, teachers work in professional isolation in their classrooms or subject departments, unable to access the wisdom of fellow professionals in the next classroom or the next school. They lack the means to share their own expertise. Although the benefits of working collaboratively are widely accepted, it is much more difficult to make it happen in practice.

Attempts to manufacture school partnerships have met with mixed success, perhaps because they are often overtly intended to remedy problems in one of the partner schools. The 'good school–bad school' marriage of convenience too easily leads to stereotyping and to the stigmatising of schools. It is also arguable that schools in crisis – for example, following Ofsted failure – cannot engage successfully in new ventures such as partnerships.

Commitment

What is the alternative to manufactured, imposed partnership? Our experience in networked learning communities (NLCs) is that voluntarism is essential. Unlike arranged unions of disparate partners designed to root out bad practice, successful networks require genuine personal and professional commitment based on assumptions of equality and an open approach to learning relationships. There is no ideal form for these voluntary and elective associations. NLCs present themselves in many different ways.

The two sample networks described in the box right illustrate this diversity. These are not 'typical' examples – every network is different and distinctive, and successful networks are flexible and responsive.

Successful partnerships

The Networked Learning Group (NLG), in consultation with a team of external evaluators, has identified seven key characteristics of successful

partnership that underpin the work of NLCs:
- purpose and focus
- relationships
- collaboration
- enquiry
- leadership
- accountability
- capacity-building.

Not all of these features are present in equal strength in all NLCs, and the dynamics of networking mean that different aspects assume prominence at differ-

Sample networks

	Network A	Network B
Network composition	11 schools – 1 infant, 5 primary, 1 junior, 2 secondary schools and 2 colleges	9 schools – 7 high schools and 2 colleges
Location	Mixed urban and rural in a large county authority	Mostly urban in a unitary (city) authority
Special features	■ Low free school meals (FSM) ■ Low special educational needs	■ High FSM ■ Low SEN
History	Pre-existing relationships incorporated into NLC work	Pre-existing relationships incorporated into NLC work
Other initiatives	None recorded	■ 8 schools receive leadership incentive grants ■ 8 are part of an Excellence in Cities initiative ■ Creativity ■ Motivation
Skills focus	■ Lifelong learning ■ Thinking skills ■ Transition ■ Raising attainment	■ Pupil voice
Curriculum focus	■ Extracurricular provision ■ Literacy ■ Modern foreign languages	■ Numeracy
Key processes and activities	■ Innovative use of information technology ■ Strategy and steering groups meet regularly ■ Staff routinely cascade training they receive to colleagues in other schools ■ Network offers its own training programme for middle leaders, modelled on NCSL programmes	■ Establishment of collaborative leadership learning groups ■ Teacher-research activity
Pupil impact	Increased value added at KS2 and KS3	Increased value added at KS3

Useful things to know

The Networked Learning Group works within the NCSL to develop collaborative learning among school leaders working in networks. The NLC programme was launched in 2002 by the NLG???? to facilitate school-to-school networks comprising a group or cluster of schools working collaboratively in partnership with local authorities, HEIs and the wider community to improve opportunities and raise standards for their pupils.

Learning foci

Network members felt more motivated and became more closely engaged when the main learning foci:
■ were clearly articulated (making it easier to generate purposeful activity and target resources)
■ were specific and explicit
■ had the potential to involve all students and teachers – examples might be innovative uses of information technology in the classroom or a network-wide focus on writing
■ had goals that were expressed in terms of benefit to/effect on students – setting the moral agenda
■ set clear expectations for what would be visible when goals were achieved
■ made explicit links between adult and pupil learning activities – for example, by linking continuing professional development to pupil learning objectives and replicating or modifying adult learning processes in work with students.

ent stages. This article focuses on the four characteristics of most relevance to classroom practice.

Purpose and focus

Every partnership needs goals and consensus on the nature of its activity. Every NLC prepared a written bid to join the programme. They defined learning foci and the nature and expected outcomes of proposed activity. Although this was timeconsuming, it effectively drew school leaders together and enabled them to articulate their own visions of what success in specific areas might look like. It offered a chance to establish shared values and to determine their own goals, separate from – but complementary to – Government-imposed targets and objectives. Writing the bid was 'the tip of the iceberg' – visible evidence of the discussion and debate that stimulated thinking. The completed bid became the basis for network design and acted as a:
■ memorandum of the original commitment
■ baseline against which to measure progress
■ marker against which to chart digressions from original intentions and aspirations.

Many networks revisited their original decisions after the first few months, because they realised their initial thinking had been too general. It was difficult to engage colleagues outside the original working group in activity that seemed to lack clearly defined goals. Characteristics of successful learning foci are shown in the box above.

To enable every network member to contribute effectively to the learning focus, networks need to explore assumptions and to articulate common values. They need to revisit some of the foundation work done in preparing the bid, opening it up to wider school communities so that they, too, can establish common ground.

Collaboration

History can have a big impact on collaboration in the early stages of partnership. In some NLCs, partner schools simply formalised an already close relationship by becoming an officially recognised network. In others, there was no history of collaboration. Some NLCs, particularly those in the secondary sector, told us that they had previously been locked in competition, especially around pupil recruitment and staff retention. This was not necessarily a barrier to effective cooperation, but these schools had to design a purpose-built network from scratch. Where a previous relationship was in

By linking CPD to pupil learning objectives and replicating or modifying adult learning processes in work with student

place, some networks found it difficult to break away from established habits and processes.

Network activity varied from regular shared events and project work to occasional formal meetings. Some enthusiastic LEAs actively fostered networks. Others emerged from a perception that the LEA was not doing enough to support schools. Many primary networks in rural areas came together because teachers felt cut off from wider professional debate. We found that newly-appointed heads were often particularly keen to learn from the experiences of heads in the area and were more open to networking than others who were longer established in post.

One form of collaboration leads to others. The most successful schools tend to be involved in several collaborative arrangements.

The NLC programme was deliberately non-prescriptive, leaving schools to design their own structures and relationships according to need. There is no blueprint for successful networking.

To create a framework for collaboration, NLCs concentrated on changing practice and changing school climates. These two aspects of their work are visible in four interdependent types of process, shown in the box below.

NLCs often chose to begin with low-risk, low-challenge activities, such as shared Inset or learning walks, which broke down barriers, created trust and built momentum quickly. Learning walks, for example, work best where there is a specific objective, such as how schools create learning environments that support pupils with behavioural
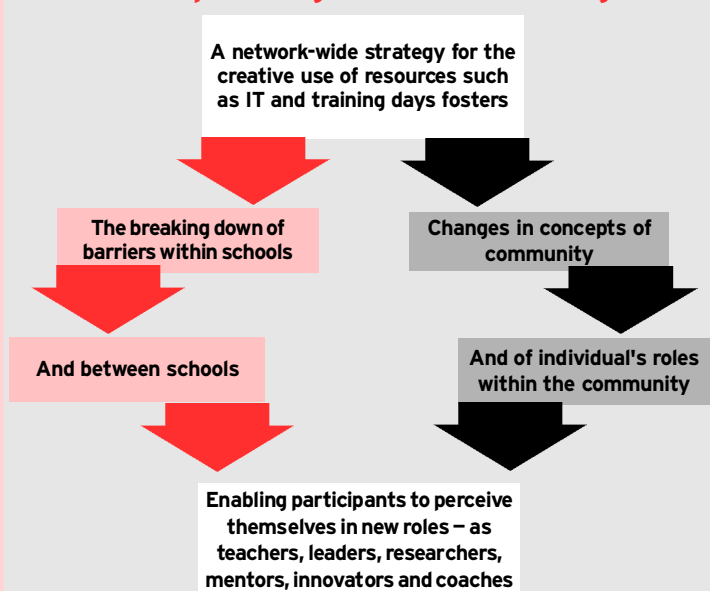
Framework for collaboration

■ Providing supportive social and emotional conditions
■ Coordination and planning
■ Developing people and processes
■ Fostering evidence led classrooms

The diagram below illustrates how these four processes work together to create change and to promote collaborative learning both within schools and across the community.

Processes for promoting collaborative learning

A network-wide strategy for the creative use of resources such as IT and training days fosters

The breaking down of barriers within schools

Changes in concepts of community

And between schools

And of individual's roles within the community

Enabling participants to perceive themselves in new roles – as teachers, leaders, researchers, mentors, innovators and coaches

Co-leaders' activity

Support: providing intellectual leadership – for example, in understanding processes of school-based capacity-building or curriculum development

Engaged reflection: sensitivity to individual circumstances – and to the influence of external factors on individual and school activism

Detached reflection: maintaining a coherent picture of the NLC as a whole, alongside an understanding of differences between schools and between individuals within them

Pacemaker (active/passive): knowing when to 'drive the network forward' and when to 'let go' so that others can take the chance to lead

> **Networking offers the chance to sample the experience and expertise of an unseen host of colleagues**

difficulties. Such activities take collaboration into the wider school environment and make it visible to all. While it was important to ensure that all such activity was explicitly linked to the network's overall goals, these events allowed for informal dialogue between staff at different levels. Some of the most productive relationships grew from dialogue between those in similar roles who might otherwise not have met.

All network activity offers formal and informal learning, whether it is based on a programmed meeting, shared Inset, learning walks or one-to-one discussion. Each contact provides an opportunity for:
- formal learning – transmission and exchange of information, ideas and best practice
- informal learning – knowledge acquired through casual conversation
- subjective learning – understanding produced by reflection.

This threefold process enables the development of technical skills to be underpinned by a growing understanding of the more complex issues underlying a task. Practitioners begin to focus on learning

Network A: Making good use of practical resources

This network (also see the box in the middle of page 28) has developed a virtual learning environment (VLE) using funding from external sponsors, gained from specialist school status and via industry grants. Staff at one school have passed their own training on to others in partner schools who then cascade the training to their colleagues. Because the network includes primary and secondary schools, teachers have access to resources from different key stages. They use these to help gifted and talented students, and as revision materials to reinforce what pupils should already have learned. They can create personalised learning programmes using a far wider range of resources than would normally be available in one school. Working together on this project helps to create a closer understanding of student experiences in transition and enables Year 7 pupils to experience a better start in secondary school.

The VLE has brought staff together in new and more ambitious professional debate as they trial each other's resources to decide what should be offered on the VLE. Trialling in this way ensures that only the best materials reach the site and saves hours of planning time. It also reduces the amount of paper in circulation as meeting notes are posted electronically.

While School A carried out the initial development of the VLE, other schools can now post their own materials on to the site and use it in their own schools for their own projects, so it has become communal property. (PLS PROVIDE URL)

The time saved has been used to develop new ideas – one school is currently trialling a homework project for Year 7 students. Students can work more independently on more ambitious projects but with easy access to the support and advice of their teachers. They have their own chatrooms dedicated to the discussion of specific work-related topics. They also canvass opinions on topics for discussion in School Council. In combination with a range of multimedia teaching resources, the VLE offers students a means of communication that is appropriate to their age.

The network is widely recognised for its pioneering work and has been asked to support other schools embarking on similar innovative projects. Value added across the network continues to exceed averages within the local authority at both KS2 and KS3. This was measured by the NLG using KS2 and KS3 outcomes and comparing the value added to that of peer group schools in the same authority.

how to learn. Understanding that all adults in school networks are also learners is fundamental to success.

Several networks that began with a top-down approach later decided to relaunch in a way that engaged a much wider spectrum of the school population, including pupils. This made explicit expected changes in attitudes and climate within partner schools. This climate change has the potential to create network sustainability and support the longer term effectiveness of practitioner innovation.

Exposure to new ideas and working practices can be the most inspirational aspect of school partnership. Those already in networks take differing views on the roots of effective sharing that depend on the range of their own personal experience. Some think partnerships can only be effective if all those involved come from similar circumstances, so that they begin with common values and experiences and speak a shared language. Others have been surprised by what they can learn from schools they had assumed to be utterly different from their own.

Schools use many different approaches to create partnership synergy. These include:
- learning walks and intervisitations – visits to other schools with a predetermined purpose and feedback mechanism
- dividing a major project, perhaps a large-scale enquiry project, between schools so that each has its own aspect and is responsible for its own contribution
- shared events and CPD (these can often be more effective if budgets are pooled to give greater purchasing power and input into design).

Many networks have collectively adopted an entrepreneurial approach to external resources, capitalising on increased purchasing power to buy in tailormade CPD that would not otherwise be affordable. Events and publications have modelled resources that can be adopted and adapted according to local circumstances and specific needs. Network A (see the box left) has been proactive in sharing its work with other aspirational schools – not as a template but as an inspirational exemplar for those schools to adapt for their own purposes.

Leadership and capacity-building

Our research tells us that networks develop most rapidly when they honour their commitment to distributed leadership that is not restricted to those in traditional leadership roles. For example, teaching assistants can become leaders in information technology training or in emotional intelligence work, or young teachers can become engaged in enquiry and lead sessions on their findings. NLCs are expected to create diverse opportunities for staff to lead. Pupils might also have better opportunities to influence school policy and teaching styles.

Initial network structures are often not enough to ensure such development. For genuine change to occur, school and network leaders need to recognise their own roles as learners and facilitators. This recognition enables them to create opportunities for others to lead. Joint working arrangements between network schools create the fertile environments in which new leadership takes root.

New leadership roles need to emerge to create shared objectives. For example, enquiry activity may produce a need for lead learners in each school or for

Key points

■ Networks' capacity to develop rapidly was greatly improved where key structures, roles, appointments and group memberships were determined at an early stage, either as part of the initial bid or in a subsequent process of refinement and redefinition.
■ Networking demands high levels of trust and enthusiasm based on open and honest relationships within and between schools. These need to be supportive of debate and tolerant of challenge. Such a high degree of trust can be difficult to secure where schools have little previous history of working together and the external environment is one of competition and negativity.
■ Partnership planning needs to address individual and collective capacity to take on these different roles – for example, by offering teacher-researchers mentoring and coaching.
■ Our research tells us that networks develop most rapidly when they honour their commitment to distributed leadership.
■ Facilitation, both internal and external, is essential to networks.

coaches and mentors. These roles are open to staff at all levels, irrespective of job titles, experience or grades. The roles change and combine in various ways, depending on whether support is needed for enquiry skills, leadership learning, the development of new practices, support for activity or the practicalities of network management. Some of NLCs' most effective and energising work has come from the development of teaching assistants and support staff and their emergence as newly confident members of the professional community. Network members need to feel supported and secure in moving between these different groups and roles if they are to be fully engaged in the whole range of partnership participation and activity.

NLCs were designed to be led by at least two individuals (co-leaders) from different institutions who were active in the planning and task-orientated aspects of establishing new partnerships. They also adopted some of the roles and functions initially undertaken by external networked learning group facilitators – experienced individuals, mostly former heads, who acted as critical friends and advisers. Co-leaders identified four key aspects (and characteristics) of their activity – see the box top left on page 30.

Co-leaders needed to combine a clear focus on long-term goals with sensitivity and flexibility that could respond to individual need. For some, success itself was challenging as rapid development allowed others to take ownership of aspects of network activity. Moving from a position of leadership to that of learner or follower can be problematic. As networks grew, co-leaders often moved away from high-profile activity to less visible, facilitative roles.

Links with external agencies

The ability of networks to capitalise on their own work can be enhanced by the support of external agencies such as universities and LEAs. This proved extremely productive for many NLCs, offering a bank of financial, intellectual and administrative resources. NLCs commonly used the expertise of these individuals in the form of critical friendship.

In many cases, an LEA had been involved in establishing the network from its earliest stages. Such involvement was helpful where the LEA was sensitive to the needs of individual institutions and brokered partnerships. It was less beneficial where the LEA acted simply as an agent, bringing random schools together or 'directing' schools to partner. Effective LEAs with a high proportion of schools in

Networks develop most rapidly when they honour their commitment to distributed leadership that is not restricted to those in traditional leadership roles

complex and challenging circumstances tended to be more proactive in forming school networks than others. Full exploitation of the relationships between networks and external agencies depends on a common understanding of roles and requirements. In some networks, an external agent acted as a facilitator, offering a variety of reflective, directive or interventionist approaches dependent on the challenges faced by the network. Network B in the box, below, shows that leadership is a process and not a position.

New opportunities

The Networked Learning Communities programme was established as a four-year project to be completed in 2006. Only now are we beginning to see clear evidence of its success in terms of adult energy, motivation and creativity and improved student attainment. This article has only covered a tiny part of the diversity, enthusiasm and innovation that have been defining characteristics of the programme. It is not possible to describe a 'typical' network or to deliver a prescription that will guarantee success to anyone wishing to replicate that innovation.

Networking offers the chance to engage with a wider professional community and to sample the experience and expertise of an unseen host of colleagues in every type of school, all of whom are striving for the same goals and aspirations.

Dr Barbara Spender, writer and researcher, NCSL Networked Learning Communities

For further information about Networked Learning Communities and information about publications, see NCSL's website: www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

Network B : Leadership is a process and not a position

This network (also see the box on page 28) began with a desire to put an end to the isolation often experienced by school leaders even within a close-knit city community. This quickly expanded to offer opportunities for others to take on leadership roles, particularly through research that might inform progress on the pupil learning foci. The network worked with the LEA to define the purposes and types of leadership they wanted to support. They worked in collaborative leadership learning groups based on different aspects of leadership. In addition to headship and subject leadership, these included curriculum development, teaching and learning and e-learning.

Once leadership forms had been determined, network groups decided how different types of leadership should be supported – through practical resources, self-evaluation tools and the establishment of sub-networks and skills workshops.

One group consisted of teacher-researchers – between one and three people in each school. It has produced nine pieces of separate, but loosely connected, work on such subjects as 'The use of maths starters' and 'Peer tutoring in maths lessons'. This has been achieved with the consistent support of the LEA maths adviser and through scheduled release time. At the end of the first phase of the research programme, the teacher researchers reviewed their work and used the review to inform the next phase of research. The network has achieved excellent value added, exceeding local and national averages.

AST	–	advanced skills teacher
BLP	–	Building Learning Power
CATS	–	credit accumulation and transfer scheme
CPD	–	continuing professional development
CPS	–	common professional scale
CUREE	–	Centre for the Use of Research and Evidence in Education
Demos	–	democracy think tank
DfES	–	Department for Education and Skills
EBI	–	even better if…
EdD	–	Doctor of Education
EiC	–	Excellence in Cities
EIP	–	Education Improvement Partnership
EPPI	–	Evidence for Policy and Practice Information
ETS	–	excellent teacher status
FSM	–	free school meals
GESOOS	–	gathering, extending, selecting, organising, ordering, scheduling
GTC	–	General Teaching Council for England
HEI	–	higher education institution
HoD	–	head of department
HoY	–	head of year
ICT	–	information and communications technology
IIP	–	Investors in People
Inset	–	inservice education of teachers
ITE	–	initial teacher education
ITT	–	initial teacher training
LEA	–	local education authority
LEPP	–	Leading Edge Partnership Programme
MORI	–	Market & Opinion Research International
NCSL	–	National College for School Leadership
NFER	–	National Foundation for Educational Research
NLC	–	networked learning community
NLG	–	Networked Learning Group
NLP	–	neurolinguistic programming
NQT	–	newly-qualified teacher
NRT	–	National Remodelling Team
NUT	–	National Union of Teachers
Ofsted	–	Office for Standards in Education
Panda	–	Performance AND Assessment
PGCE	–	Postgraduate certificate of education
PIES	–	participative, inclusive, effective and short
PLC	–	professional learning community
QCA	–	Qualifications and Curriculum Authority

QTS	–	qualified teacher status
SAT	–	standard assessment task
SCIP	–	School and College Improvement Programme (University of Leicester)
SEF	–	self-evaluation form
SEN	–	special educational needs
SMART	–	specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, time-related
TDA	–	Training and Development Agency for Schools
TLA	–	Teacher Learning Academy
TLO	–	tracking learning online
TPLF	–	Teachers' Professional Learning Framework
TTA	–	Teacher Training Agency
UCET	–	Universities Council for the Education of Teachers
VLE	–	virtual learning environment
WWW	–	what worked well

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