

# **Knots and threads: the power of networks**

**Madeline Church**

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By Madeline Church

### **Introduction**

In 2001, a small group of us – network co-ordinators and a facilitator – got together in a collaborative action research group to pool our knowledge and expertise, and to ask ourselves some hard questions about how to do evaluation in networks.

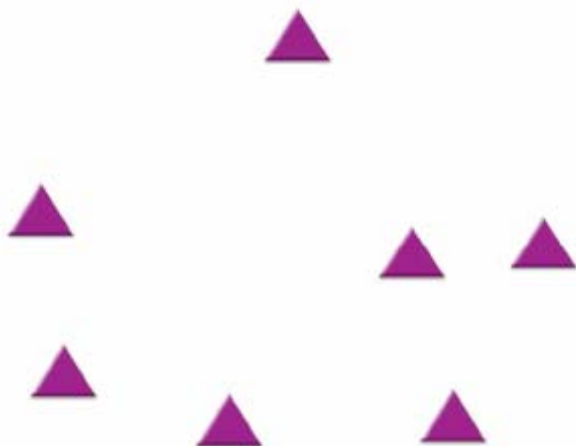
We soon realised that we needed to be able to say what we thought networks are and what they do in order for us to begin the task of developing appropriate ways of designing evaluations. We pooled our knowledge and expertise (what the Networked Learning Group (NLG) would call ‘the knowledge in the room’) and talked to many other co-ordinators, network members and those who fund networks. We also trawled the available public knowledge about human networks, coalitions and collaborative working models to help us to locate what we were doing in the wider sense of the world (what NLG would call ‘the public knowledge-base’).

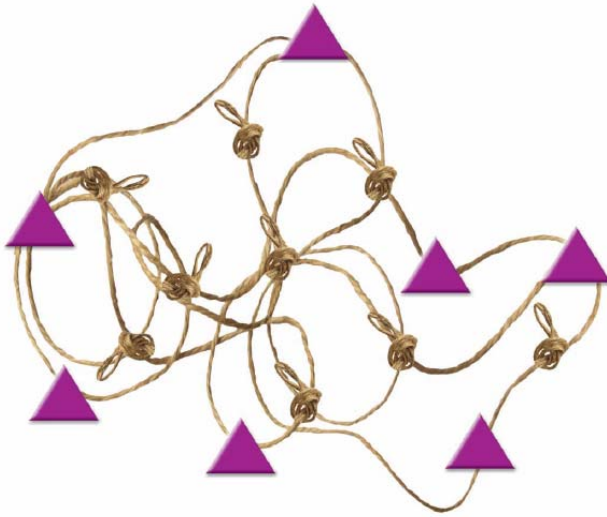
And we then talked a great deal, asking ourselves questions, and seeking to articulate what we knew as professionals, both instinctively and from our many years’ experience. As a result we came up with a simple metaphor, some core principles and a way of talking about networks that seems to work.

What has happened to the research (Church et al, 2003) since we did it is a reflection of the power of networks and the way they open up new ways of working together, doing business together, researching together and acting together. It has found its way to those who have been interested enough to use it, and been passed on to many who have since advanced the thinking considerably. This research is now four years old, and many others have moved the debate on. But however much work I do now in other networks and other environments, it remains an incredibly useful starting point.

### **Knots and threads**

The metaphor of knots and threads that emerged from our collaboration is a good one for the following reason: it is very simple, and at the same time it captures a complexity that is very hard to define and put into words.





This image holds a number of aspects in it that in our view are central to what is different about a network, both as a structure and as a process. In fact networks and networking are often used interchangeably as terms, which shows how the structure (network) and the process of doing (networking) tend to be seen as one thing.

The image shows the participant members of a network (be they institutional or individual) as triangles. These triangles are connected together by threads of communication and relationship. And these threads come together in knots of activity, which hold the participant members in a web of activity and communication, out of which grows the purposeful work of the net. The strength of the net comes through the work that the members do together and the trust that is built through the communication necessary for the work to happen and to connect with others in the network. The threads tie us to each other through our joint activity and create the strength to hold us. In this way, you see how a network holds together autonomously acting participant members in a loose but connected structure.

The threads give the network its life. They link the participants through communication, shared ideas, relational processes, conflict and information. The knots are the joint activities aimed at realising the common purpose. These knots of activity make the most of members' contributions, commitment and skills. The external evaluation of the NLC programme (Earl et al, 2006) described effective knots as being characterised by 'rigorous and challenging joint work' and 'collaborative enquiry'. Such knots provide benefit, purpose, energy, collective empowerment and inspiration.

The net is the structure or network architecture created by the relationships and the joint activities, a structure that allows communities of diversity to come together, a structure which participants create, contribute to and benefit from. The structure provides solidarity without losing identity, and is dynamic enough to incorporate new participants and expand without losing its common purpose. The structure is light, flexible and adaptive, not fixed and constraining.

The threads are given tensile strength by the knots that tie them together, and those common activities lead to greater trust, synergy, community and relationship. In a sense, the tighter the knots, the stronger the net.

The co-ordinator or facilitator, if there is one, has the job of keeping the net in good order. The co-ordination of such a structure can be represented as a role involving values affirmation, inspiration, connection, maintenance and repair. It involves seeing the true diversity and helping it to work as a whole: watching out for broken threads, knotting together appropriate activities, putting out new threads to new participants, and extending the net. It involves working the net. Net-workers. Those who lead networks are artisans.

This concept stays true to the idea of diversity, coherence and the capacity for growth, without losing sight of the action. In the real world of practice and implementation, it is the purposeful activity (beyond the communication, information-sharing, relationships) that gives the network its meaning. It also gives the network a living feel, one dependent on the commitment and input of its participants, all held together by a tight sense of purpose. It enables us to capture the sense of a dynamic, responsive, emerging form, using the messy power of complexity, and autonomy in the whole.

This form of organisational structure, as Kevin Kelly so clearly writes, can and does grow in organic and not necessarily predictable ways:

*Whereas the Atom represents clean simplicity, the Net channels the messy power of complexity ... the only organization capable of non-prejudiced growth or unguided learning is a network ... Indeed the network is the least structured organization that can be said to have any structure at all... In fact a plurality of truly divergent components can only remain coherent in a network. No other arrangement – chain, pyramid, tree, circle, hub – can contain true diversity working as a whole.*

Kevin Kelly quoted in Castells, 1996, p 61

It is very dependent on communication, trust and actively doing things together to ensure it doesn't stagnate. At the same time it has to remain an environment in which participant members contribute because they want to and are excited and have something to offer. Few networks survive when coercion or control are exercised too heavily.

### **So what does control a network?**

Many people are fearful of the very loose, uncontrollable nature of a network. Most of us are used to command and control forms of organisation in which hierarchies are clear and authority resides at the top, and certain people have responsibilities for maintaining proper order. Networks are by nature flat and flexible structures where power and authority is hard to see or to fix, and the work occurs through a desire to do things with others, collaboratively. While we have always lived in human networks of relationships, and there are some very powerful networks of patronage (the 'old boy network' is a general term for this), most of us are not very experienced at how we might go about working in this way. For those of us in our initial small action research group, we learned and continue to learn on the job, through instinct, trial and error.

Most influential in our thinking was the work of Robert Chambers (1997), who is known in the international development world as a champion of validating the knowledge and expertise of those living in poverty, and what they can teach us about life, growth and development.

He uses four Ds to describe the principles that we should hold dear in our work with those affected by poverty. They were very useful starting points for us because they challenge normal power structures and relations, something that networks by their nature both invite us and force us to do. These Ds helped us to work out what principles control the nature of networks generally. And they seem to capture the creative spirit of a network working at its best:

- diversity
- dynamism
- democracy
- decentralisation

**Diversity** – one of the core qualities of a network is that it allows diverse participants to belong in loose connection with one another. The interaction between diverse opinions and ideas is creative and progressive.

**Dynamism** – a network frees participants to be dynamic, to propose activities and to get involved in doing them. Keeping the structure light and facilitative, enabling and supportive is key to this.

**Democracy** – networks are much more open ways of organising than hierarchical organisations and they depend on trust. Decision-making has to be seen to be fair, inclusive, effective and widespread to keep the net working. Democracy doesn't necessarily mean voting and elections, but it does mean that those who lead and represent must consult and report back in transparent ways.

**Decentralisation** – this is about sharing out leadership and allowing decisions to be made at the place where they most matter, where the action is. It is highly dependent on those participating sharing the values and vision of the network, and on effective communication.

Each of these needs to be fleshed out in practice, with simple agreed protocols that bind the participating members together. The key is to have openly agreed and adhered to core values and principles to allow for the greatest possible diversity and decentralisation. This helps connect up a dynamic and active network in which people

contribute their knowledge and capacity, and gain strength from the contributions of others.

### **Challenges of net-working**

While this all seems very simple, the practicalities of doing it can be quite complicated. It is worth holding a few questions in mind. What do you want to do? How do you want to co-ordinate it? And how are you going to make sure that those involved contribute and gain to their fullest potential?

Working together on what? This question should be at the heart of things. Networks come together because people want to do something together, be it share practice, do research, change policy or learn from one another, and they believe that more can be achieved together than alone. Networks are about working with others on something in order to make a difference, and it is really important to spend time working out what that purpose or purposes are, and what values underpin the ideas. It is tempting to try to put a structure in place before deciding what you are doing, and it needs to be the other way round. The key is to facilitate collaborative work with a light hand, not strangle it with rules, roles and structures. Explicit shared values and purpose at the centre help to allow the greatest level of dynamic creativity in the work.

### **Network co-ordination**

How you co-ordinate what you do depends on the numbers involved, complexity of tasks, the number of knots and the volume of communication. One of the things we all recognise is that when a network co-ordinator is put in place, there can be a creeping tendency for the work to become centralised. Part of the job of co-ordination is to keep balancing the network, to ensure that the right level of communication and facilitation is happening to help people do things together to realise the purpose, but ensure that the co-ordinator doesn't end up doing it themselves. You always need to keep checking on that balance, no matter how experienced or advanced the network is.

### **Facilitative, shared and distributed leadership**

Making sure leadership is decentralised, or distributed around, is one of the ways of counteracting this tendency to centralise. What this often means in practice is parcelling up tasks between you and giving as many participants as possible a stake in the work. It also means that the network helps to foster collaborative leadership skills through 'doing on behalf of' rather than 'training'. It also ensures that the network stays dynamic and keeps using the shared resources to their maximum potential.

One of the things to remember is that a network is alive. None of the tensions that exist between order and freedom, dynamism and control, centralised and decentralised activity need to be resolved. Balancing these things is a constant task, and is the task most often of the co-ordinator, but is really something that needs to be appreciated by all involved.

### Mini-checklist

- People unite around compelling ideas and purposes. Make sure that the broad consensus, the highest common denominator, the most we can realistically strive for, is clear. This is the purpose, and it controls the work.
- Make sure the values and principles are explicit and transparent. These are what members are accountable to.
- Keep central rules to a minimum: the objective is to support not strangle. Keep checking that you are balancing the network.
- Encourage everyone to lead on something as this creates capacity and ownership.
- See the joint activities as more than just outputs: they are the knots that tie people together, that keep the web tensioned, so that people support and trust one another.
- Make dynamism and diversity goals in themselves. It is this that brings creativity into the work.
- View input and participation as a central objective since the more people engage, the more resources there are for everyone.

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