Networked Learning Communities

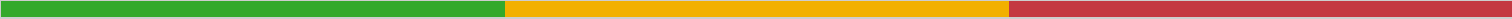| learning from each other	learning with each other	learning on behalf of each other

"Like no other initiative"

NCSL National College for School Leadership

We're all a bit initiative weary … but this is like no other initiative. Jaquie Smith, Network Co-Leader

For many NLCs, it was the idea of creating a learning community of schools that attracted them to the national initiative. David How, Network Co-Leader

Introduction

Towards the end of the 2000-2001 academic year, and in response to the publication of the CPD Strategy, with its emphasis upon schools as professional learning communities, the newly formed National College for School Leadership submitted a proposal to the DfES.

The proposition was that schools seeking to become professional learning communities could achieve this more appropriately and more profoundly by working together interdependently in networks.

Launched as a concept at the CPD Strategy Regional Conferences in the Autumn Term of 2001, the increasing ground swell of support for the idea since then has been overwhelming. The principles underpinning the Networked Learning Communities (NLC) Programme, and the model to which they give rise, seem to have captured a moment in the tide of educational events. On the one hand, the government, now in its second term, is seeking to develop practice-informed policy, to stimulate innovation, to foster diversity, to promote informed professional judgement and to utilise practitioner knowledge for school and system transformation. At the same time, the profession has become weary of a climate of competition, outside-in change programmes, normative improvement agendas and externally generated accountability systems. There is a growing synergy between government and practitioner views that we need to create space in the system for creativity, lateral learning and accountability, distributed leadership and the sharing of practice. Having achieved sustained improvement in education through an externally generated reform agenda, transformation will take on different and less predictable shapes.

It is likely to occupy different directions of travel, too, being less outside-in than inside-out; less top-down than lateral in direction; less one (the centre) to many than many (the network) to many (other networks).

There also seems to be an energy in the system to make positive sense of diversity. Diversity is here to stay. It will either lead to more competition, divisiveness and inequality (the doomsday scenario) or, as thousands of richly multicultural schools across the country have demonstrated, it can be a cause for collaboration, celebration, affirmation and mutual learning. If it is to become the latter – and it must be – it is likely to be facilitated by schools working in interdependent and mutually supportive collegiate structures (as Tim Brighouse has advocated), or as federations (as government policies are promoting), or as 'networked learning communities'.

In the end, more than 150 Networked Learning Communities made submissions in March 2002, and 48 networks (from Berwick on Tweed to Penzance) started in September 2002. Another 40 were approved for a January 2003 start.

This article is an attempt to portray some of the core features of the Networked Learning Communities initiative and to outline the reasons why we believe it has the potential to have a profound impact upon the way schools learn with, from and on behalf of one another.

What follows is structured into the following sections:

The Underpinning Beliefs

There are some core beliefs underpinning the
NLC Programme. Perhaps the most important are around
morally purposeful educational practice – a theme of its
own which is dealt with separately later.

Beyond that, there is a belief set that runs as follows. We believe:

- that there is sufficient known about learning that, if applied consistently across our classrooms, it could enable every child to be the most powerful learner that he or she can be

- that normative notions of intelligence are out of date, and that all children can be intelligent. We believe that intelligence is not fixed and can be grown

- that schools that function as professional learning communities will be dynamic and motivational contexts for both children and teachers

- that organisations that continuously learn are healthy and adaptive places in a changing environment

- that schools, teachers and leaders who aspire to continuous learning in this way look beyond their own school – that simply recycling existing internal knowledge is a poor foundation for growth!

- that collaboration rather than competition is exciting and motivating for professionals committed to learning communities

- that the knowledge and the will exists to do these things, and that what is required are coherent models, a facilitative policy environment and a commitment to learning at all levels of the system

We also believe passionately that there is no profession with greater leadership potential than teaching, that there is no more important activity than improving the lives of young people, and that to do so teachers and schools must work and learn together.

These core values drive the College's commitment to the development and support of Networked Learning Communities. The Programme invites schools to form deeply interdependent Networks within which they work with and on behalf of one another for the benefit of children, the schools and the communities they serve. How simple is that!

The Six Levels of Learning

The Networked Learning Communities Programme is designed to encourage change through learning at multiple levels of the education system. Below are outlined the six interconnected Levels of Learning which are the foundation for the collaborative planning and ongoing activity of each network.

These six descriptions explore and outline some of the assumptions upon which the Programme is based.

1 Pupil learning

NLCs are expected to have a clear pedagogic focus at the heart of their activity which will embrace all pupils and all teachers. Improving pupil outcomes remains the Programme's top-line, and the fundamental motivation for those participating in it. In particular, the Programme focuses on the development, application and evaluation of a wide range of evidence-informed approaches to raising levels of pupil achievement across the networks.

This focus on evidence and enquiry rests on the assumption that the people best placed to identify the needs of students within their particular school context, and to improve classroom practices to reflect this understanding, are teachers themselves.

2 Adult learning

The NLC Programme is also, therefore, about creating school cultures in which teachers learn with and alongside their students. It goes beyond traditional CPD initiatives in emphasising the value and effectiveness of practitioner enquiry and collaborative approaches to staff learning, including but not restricted to study groups, enquiry partnerships, work shadowing, coaching, mentoring, classroom observation and school visits.

This focus on professional autonomy, moral purpose and the potential to contribute actively to new teaching practice and policy will place teachers and school leaders at the heart of innovation within the education system and, it is hoped, potentially overcome some of the most immediate and urgent difficulties facing the teaching profession – notably the supply and retention of high quality teachers.

3 Leadership for learning and leadership development

The NLC Programme seeks to invest in the capacity of headteachers, network leaders and other leaders within schools to create the enabling and facilitative conditions for networked learning. This is based on two key assumptions. First, creating a culture which encourages professionals to change their practices, and organisations to experiment and take risks, requires effective strategic leadership. Establishing and sustaining effective knowledge-creating and knowledge-sharing networks will not happen without new kinds of support beyond that offered by conventional headteacher and middle manager leadership.

Second, the Programme assumes that there is a much wider pool of latent leadership talent than the system currently harnesses. Existing school structures often offer relatively limited space and opportunity for leadership development. Moreover, they are likely to privilege the emergence of certain leadership styles over others. Leaders who feel that they must assiduously conform only to the dominant norms are unlikely to facilitate significant change within the potential of the Programme. Leadership travels in new and different directions within networks.

4 School-wide learning

The NLC Programme is designed to support the development of schools as professional learning communities. It aims to transform schools into learning organisations, capable not just of doing what they currently do better, or responding more effectively to current demands and environment, but of generating a capacity for continuous innovation, adaptation, problem generation and recreation.

In this respect, the Programme differs markedly from other initiatives (like the Literacy and Numeracy Strategy), which focus only on particular school management issues, teaching practices or curriculum areas. This point is an obvious, but nevertheless important one. Schools have historically assumed the role of recipients of change, responding to new central demands and having accountability defined through standardised frameworks from without. It could be argued that this has eroded the capacity of schools and leaders to change themselves – this Programme represents a potentially significant step towards restoring that capacity.

5 School-to-school learning

The most distinctive feature of the NLC Programme is the idea that teaching professionals will generate and share more knowledge through working together than by operating in isolation. This rationale is based on a number of assumptions, the most important of which is that the best way to encourage teachers to share knowledge within a school is also to get them to share knowledge with others outside the school.

6 Network-to-network learning

Finally, a key premise of the NLC Programme is that whilst networks help the schools within them to develop local, context-specific solutions to the problems they face, schools in other networks should also be able to understand and interpret these solutions and transpose them into their own contexts. In this way, network-based forms of organisation are seen to carry the potential to accelerate knowledge creation and innovation right across the education system – to make learning and the resultant knowledge widely available.

Networking
learning *from* each other

As you are reading this, and if it is a working school day, there will be teachers in classrooms in Blackpool, Boston and Bristol who are performing miracles with young people. Imagine a system where such practice was visible and readily transferable.

Education is somewhat unusual in this respect. It is hard for excellent practice to transfer, even from classroom to classroom within a school, never mind between schools and across geographical areas. In contrast, legal precedent, set in a courtroom in Newcastle this month, is quite likely to be enacted in a court in Gloucester next month. Education could and must become more like that, so that grounded theory can be drawn from the craft knowledge of teachers in ways that allow its transfer.

One of the key requirements for this will be lateral learning norms (rather than vertical). Another will be inside-out practices (rather than outside-in). A third dimension will be 'nestedness' – a concept whereby each level of the system comes to view its role as being to learn with and from, and to add value to, the level that it serves, both directly and by making connections and moving knowledge around within that level. This will involve a shift from vertical to lateral accountability norms, too – but there is no accountability more powerful than mutually high and shared professional expectations.

Networks are not only, though, about the lateral transfer or sharing of practice (a comparatively passive concept). They are also about powerful learning norms, and the social processes that underpin learning – learning, developing practice and making personal and contextual meaning together.

Learning *with* is a collaborative and co-construction model.

We know, for example, that exchange of 'best practice' is an elusive concept. Practice is often particular to context and does not transfer well. It often requires unique understandings about underpinning principles and implementation sensitivities. It is sometimes person or people dependent. More important, it is not a school's practice that needs to transfer, but the processes that led to the practice and that continue to develop it. Sharing 'best process' is a more sustaining and sustainable concept for learning.

At the College we are developing what we believe to be potent models of learning built around two frames of thinking:

- One of these frames involves three domains or fields of knowledge. The first of these is the knowledge that is housed within the profession – making explicit the often tacit craft knowledge of teachers and leaders. The second is what we think of as public knowledge – the research, theory and international practice available but not always well utilised within school learning processes. The third is the knowledge that practitioners engaged in the active study of practice together can generate through co-construction – through learning sets, enquiry processes and the conscious study of innovation.

- The second frame involves the depth of the learning. Building upon work undertaken for and with the New Visions Programme by John West-Burnham, we have classified this as shallow, deep and profound learning. These are not value-laden terms. All three modes have their valid places and characteristics. However, for fundamental change to both practices and to beliefs, learning that operates between the frames of deep and profound is required – levels that are just not achievable through conventional approaches to training.

Believing, as we do, that every child can be a powerful learner, and that the knowledge exists, either within the profession or within the external knowledge base, then it is through putting what is known together, studying and drawing theory from practice and sharing that within schools, networks and more widely within the system that we will gradually move closer to these aspirations for all children.

Learning *with* each other, using powerful learning designs built from the three fields of knowledge is a challenging, rigorous and knowledge-expanding process.

Communities
learning *on behalf of* each other

Learning 'on behalf of' is the most integral and critical component of Networked Learning Communities. It occupies the field of moral purpose, and it is about an educational system that cares about the success of all children.

The route to ensuring that all adults learn, that schools learn and that schools learn from one another involves a belief that a part of our responsibility as educational professionals is to move away from the historical privacy of practice and to learn together, not only in order to improve our own teaching, but to help others to improve theirs and to contribute incrementally to the wider educational knowledge-base.

Recently, I undertook some work in South Africa, where I visited schools located in what is called an 'informal settlement' – a shanty town. In a primary school in one of the largest and poorest settlements I met Nora Tsuka, the Deputy Head. She shared with us the work on co-operative learning that she was doing with the children in her class. What she said provides a powerful metaphor for our NLC work:

"I tell my children that they are responsible, within their co-operative groups, for the learning of their learning partners. I ask them to ask each other what they had to eat the previous night. I ask them who they think might learn best, those who had rice and meat, or those who had boiled beans and who always have boiled beans. Then I suggest that they should visit each other in their homes. They should see what they eat and how they are each looked after. I invite them to think about how well they feel that their learning partner will learn the following day. They must take note, and then, the next day, when they bring their lunch to school, they will share some of their food with their learning partner."

Learning *on behalf of* each other, understanding one another's situations, empathising, caring about the success of teachers and children in other schools, caring about all children in the patch is at the heart of Networked Learning Communities.

Like no other initiative

The Launch of the Networked Learning Communities was held at the end of June 2002. The first Networks began in September 2002, holding their own school-to-school launch activities – from one of which the opening quotation was taken.

The evolving thinking behind the NLC design has been supported by some of the most enlightened practitioners and theorists in the field of education. Some were able to be present to share their ideas and optimism for the work with those present. Ruth Sutton and Ann Kilcher (consultants from Canada) shared the facilitation work with the NLC team. David Hopkins (SEU), Tom Bentley (Demos), Lauren Resnick (the Institute for Learning, Pittsburgh) and Charles Desforges (ESRC) all presented at the event, and the quotations below, taken from their presentations, offer an endorsement for both the latent potential and the scale of the aspiration of the Programme.

David Hopkins (SEU)
It seems to me that what you are doing in terms of the Networked Learning Communities is a key lever for achieving a new phase of educational reform, which is about building upon the good practice, creativity and innovation of the profession … What you see are groups of schools working together, bound together by a common purpose and trying to raise the standards of learning and achievement in our schools – and this change is coming from the bottom up … I think it can achieve two things. It will achieve a much better learning environment for the young people inside the schools we see represented. What it can also do is contribute to a more professional debate about education throughout the whole country. I believe this transformational approach to education is what our schools need.

Tom Bentley (Demos)
Networked Learning Communities and the form of substantive transformation they imply present quite compelling and often new challenges for leadership … Establishing a moral purpose and then holding it clear throughout the process is actually quite a fundamental challenge …The environment is changing so rapidly and in so many complex ways that the knowledge which could inform a different approach is simply not there yet. To take this forward in the medium to long term, those policy makers and the institutions they serve in will have to rely for knowledge on a distributed, committed and rigorous field of practitioners … and that's you!

Lauren Resnick (the Institute for Learning, Pittsburgh)
It's not about working harder, it's about working smarter … There are certain kinds of intellectual engagement that if you really work hard at, even if you're not good at yet, will actually make you smarter … An intelligence building environment will coach you in using problem-solving skills. It will praise you, but it will also hold you accountable. All of this is about organising for this new kind of effort. We can take this organising for effort idea and use it to think about how our classrooms are organised, how our schools are organised and how our networks are organized.

You can only legitimately expect people to engage in continuous learning if you agree to the concept of two way accountability. It's not just that they are accountable to you for better and better teaching, it's that you are responsible to them. They can hold you accountable for their opportunity to better learn and practice their craft …The system is responsible for providing the opportunity to learn. If it won't provide that then it can't expect accountability to its demands.

Charles Desforges (ESRC)

It is frequently the case that practitioners know more than theorists. It is frequently the case that practical knowledge is in advance of theoretical understanding …Teachers have a vast corpus of knowledge of pedagogy, of metaphors, of examples of good questions … The relationship between theoretical and practical knowledge is profound and difficult, with complex interrelations between the two. The biggest challenge will be to cross-fertilise those bodies of knowledge.

Pupils are experts, they read the system, they bring with them knowledge. They bring a body of knowledge from home which is broadly distributed into subject knowledge. They have views about what school should be for and they understand about accountability.

We know enough about learning. Those principles are well established from experiments, from anthropology, from observation, from classrooms and from laboratories. But we don't know enough to engineer them in everyday classrooms. The challenge is to finesse this knowledge so that we can hand on something to the next generation of teachers. It's a major professional challenge to bring it into the classroom. I get the feeling having walked through the door that you are up for it.

More importantly, perhaps, over 400 teachers and school leaders from more than 80 Networks made a commitment to work collaboratively within and between networks in the pursuit of educational innovation, transformational change, more powerful learning experiences and higher achievement for children. They committed to working together (as networks), working smarter (learning powerfully) and to working inter-dependently (as communities) rather than working harder alone.

There was a tremendous feeling of celebration and affirmation amongst the group, and a remarkable energy, excitement and commitment. One headteacher said of the conference: "Thank you for an inspiring two days. Our Network gained enormous benefit from the speakers. We appreciated the chance to reflect on the way in which our Network functions and how we can develop this. We came away really elated!" Another, commenting on the Programme, said: "In over twenty years of passionate involvement in education, I have never felt so uplifted, inspired and valued. This is a great and defining moment in education. I am so grateful to be part of it and determined to make it a success."

As implied in the above quotation, there is also a feeling of awe about the journey that we are embarking upon and the amount that we have to learn together if we are to achieve our aspirations for the Programme.

From September 2002, the Networks held their own launch activities. In doing so, they began a complex and challenging four year voyage (the duration of the Programme) designed to develop new understandings about the kinaesthetics of collaboration and interdependence within morally purposeful learning networks. They are seeking to do things differently and to do different things – and to support one another in studying and learning from the process. And we know that it will not be easy. The scale of the Programme, the complexity of the task, the internal and external expectations, the danger of premature evaluation and the volatility of the educational environment within which the Programme operates will all pose challenges. However, doing things differently and better is inspiring, as one Network has written in its first newsletter…

"The Networked Learning Communities initiative offers a powerful tool for transforming our professional work, and offers us a real opportunity, as practitioners, to inform future policy development. Members of (our) Network feel privileged to be in the first cohort of this national movement."

… and doing it within a Programme which has at its heart the learning and contribution of pupils is proving motivational, too:

We held a conference on student voice and participation … It felt very different – important and moving.

In conclusion, Michael Barber has recently characterised the last decade as being a period of 'informed national participation'. He sees the current decade as offering the opportunity for 'informed professional judgement' – a view endorsed at the November 2002 New Heads' Conference by the Secretary of State, Charles Clarke, who said:

"We will support you through developing collaborative arrangements between schools. Those kinds of partnerships are exceptionally important. The more schools can learn from one another, the more we will be able to support innovation."

As we said at the outset of this paper, there is an emerging synergy between policy and practitioner priorities. A fitting final word is provided by a headteacher at one of the Network launch conferences, who said:

"I am in the twilight of my professional career, and I have waited so long for a programme like Networked Learning Communities which empowers teachers to learn and work together, to be listened to…to really know there is a bottom-up voice."

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