

Networked Learning Communities

learning from each other

learning with each other

learning on behalf of each other

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Networks

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“The kind of sharing that goes on in educational networks often has the effect of dignifying and giving shape to the process and content of educators’ experiences, the daily-ness of their work, which is often invisible to outsiders yet binds insiders together.”

Definition

Only in the last decade has serious attention been paid to educational reform networks as an alternative form of professional development (Little, 1993). Although the idea of networks has been around for a long time, we know little about them.

Networks are becoming very popular, in part, because they encourage and seem to support many of the key ideas that reformers say are needed to produce change and improvement in schools, teaching, and learning (Darling-Hammond and McLaughlin, 1995, McLaughlin and Talbert, 1993, Cochran-Smith and Lytle, 1993).

They seem to provide:

- ☐ opportunities for teachers to both consume and generate knowledge
- ☐ a variety of collaborative structures
- ☐ flexibility and informality
- ☐ discussion of problems that often have no agreed-upon solutions
- ☐ ideas that challenge teachers rather than merely prescribing generic solutions
- ☐ an organizational structure that can be independent of, yet attached to, schools or universities
- ☐ a chance to work across school and district lines
- ☐ a vision of reform that excites and encourages risk taking in a supportive environment
- ☐ a community that respects teachers' knowledge as well as knowledge from research and reform (Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996)

Method

How do networks develop?

In the late 1970s, the National Institute of Education called together a group of scholars and charged them with discussing, writing, and creating some deeper understanding about the nature of networks. One of these scholars, Allen Parker, described five key ingredients that he found in a study of more than 60 networks. He argued that networks should have:

- ☐ a strong sense of commitment (to an innovation)
- ☐ a sense of shared purpose
- ☐ a mixture of information sharing and psychological support
- ☐ an effective facilitator
- ☐ voluntary participation and equal treatment

In another study almost 20 years later (Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996), we sought to build on Parker's ideas.

We found the following characteristics to be central:

■ Purpose and direction

Networks develop when a group of people see a need to bring people together. It could be with a lofty purpose, such as the League of Professional Schools' focus on democracy. Or it could be a purpose that emerges when people come together and find that they have real reason to collaborate. For example, the Southern Maine Partnership originally brought school and university groups together to discuss a particular set of issues. Over time, participants developed a much more ambitious agenda.

■ Building collaboration and commitment

Bringing people together with the idea that their voices and participation matter helps build trust. Initial relationships are built through meetings, conversations, and activities that create opportunities to learn and to be supported. Collaboration develops the skills of negotiation, communication, and accommodation, skills needed to translate proposals for change into the realities of practice.

■ Relationships and activities

Network activities combine listening to experts and peers. Eventually, the work of the group takes precedence and the 'expert' culture no longer dominates. The 'work' of the network becomes the sustaining force. It gives voice to people who become both consumers and generators of knowledge, in a group that truly represents them as well as larger visions for the profession.

■ Leadership as cross-cultural brokering

Leading networks is about brokering resources and people, creating 'public spaces' for people to learn and work together, building structures that encourage collaboration as a norm, and being entrepreneurial about what might be an important tool, proposal, or idea to be developed by the group.

■ Funding as a perennial problem

Foundation and government funding help, but reasonable dues and funded projects are more the norm. Each differs depending on the depth and breadth of the work. Colleges, universities, unions, and grants sometimes help with startup money, but eventually an ongoing system of financing must be established somehow.

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Challenges of networks

Regardless of how networks, coalitions, or partnerships begin, they all seem to have to negotiate a set of tensions that keep them going. These are:

■ Meaningful purposes and compelling activities

Busy people don't need another meeting to go to. So good networks have to figure out how to create activities that are attractive and rooted in the practices and problems that their members are having. At the same time they have to continually remind members of the goals they are developing (or larger purposes that brought them together). For example, teachers come together to learn about assessments in reading. At the same time the partnership's goals are to see that all students have opportunities to learn. Remember that activities are not the goals, but rather mechanisms to get there.

■ Inside knowledge and outside knowledge

Good networks must struggle with when to focus on problems of practice – the questions and challenges that arise from members daily experience – and when to focus instead on knowledge from research and reform, which may raise entirely different questions and challenges. In the beginning, participants' needs dominate, but eventually a network may want to play a bigger role in bringing in ideas from many places.

■ Centralisation/ decentralisation

The governance organisation of a network is extremely important. Often, there is a steering committee, liaisons to schools, or some small group that runs the network. New leadership roles are sometimes created

along the way. The important idea here is to keep the leadership group small, differentiating responsibilities as the network grows and deepens while keeping communication open, flexible, and creative.

■ Inclusivity/exclusivity of membership

Every network must decide how big it should be. Should it be teachers in a region? Anyone who believes in 'learner-centered schools'? Only those committed to a particular reform effort? Most important is that national and regional efforts often have principles, and/or particular ways of working together, that build over time. Networks flourish when the core work they do can be learned by others. They decline when only the pioneers (the founders) experience the meaning of the network and haven't been able to build ways for new members to experience, in some way, the nature of commitment, learning and the excitement of being in a community.

References

- Cochran-Smith, M & Lytle, S (1993). **Inside/outside: Teacher research and knowledge.** New York: Teachers College Press.
- Darling-Hammond, L & McLaughlin, MW (1995). **Policies that support professional development in an era of reform.** New York: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools, and Teaching.
- Lieberman, A & Grolnick, M (1996, Fall). **Networks and Reform in American Education.** Teachers College Record 98 (1), 7-45.

Little, JW (1993). **Teachers' professional development in an era of reform.** New York: National Center for Restructuring Education, Schools and Teaching.

McLaughlin, MW and Talbert, J (1993). **Contexts that matter for teaching and learning.** Stanford, CA: Center for Research on the Context of Secondary School Teaching.

Other resources

Cochran-Smith, M and Lytle, S (1990). **Research on teaching and teacher research: The issues that divide.** Educational Researcher 19 (2), 2-11.

Other articles on networks can be obtained through Torin Dille, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 555 Middlefield Road, Menlo Park, CA 94025, (650) 326-0278.

- Impact II – The Teachers Network web site: www.teachnet.org
- Coalition of Essential Schools web site: www.essentialschools.org
- Southern Maine Partnership web site: www.usm.maine.edu/smp

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