UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF COLLABORATIVE ENQUIRY IN NETWORKS

(a Networked Learning Communities 'think piece')

Introduction

This NLC 'think piece' is written with three particular purposes in mind. One is to explore the centrality of the role of collaborative enquiry, not only as a vehicle for the improvement of teaching and learning, but also as a means of fostering professional development, organisational learning and school-to-school learning. A second is to demystify the role of enquiry for those involved in the facilitation of networks, or the promotion of school-to-school enquiry activities such as 'learning walks' or 'research lesson study'. A third is to present a case for enquiry as one essential element of capacity building, the development of widely dispersed leadership and 'networked learning'.

In particular, the paper explores some of the key issues surrounding the use of enquiry as an energy and evidence source for improvement and as a means of professional knowledge-creation and learning – why it is so essential, what 'enquiry' means, how it works, who can do it and what it looks like in operation. The following elements are covered:

> ➢ The nature of enquiry
> ➢ Reflections upon knowledge-creation
> ➢ The purposes of enquiry (and the structural conditions that support it)
> ➢ Going to scale and generating ownership
> ➢ Making shared meanings

The subject of this think piece is collaborative enquiry, not 'action research' (although there are clearly significant areas of overlap). However, it is with action research that the theoretical underpinnings were formed - in the work of Kurt Lewin (1947, 1948) and his immediate followers (e.g. Chein, 1948, Lippett, 1985, Adelman, 1993). Lewin's focus was the application of social science methods to organisational and community development. Possibly the first to advocate the application of these action research principles to education was Corey (1949, 1953), on the grounds that practitioners would make better and more informed improvement decisions if enquiry formed the basis for their actions.

Inherent within both Lewin's and Corey's propositions were the following principles:

- The application of context-specific knowledge for improvement purposes
- The utilisation of action research (or enquiry) principles to move organisations from their traditions of individualistic/autonomous practice and towards collaborative and integrative approaches
- A focus upon the imperative of improvement beyond the value placed upon purity of research knowledge
- A belief in the "mutually reinforcing values of science, democracy and education" (Argyris et al, 1985)
- Continuous problem-solving and the ongoing study of improvement endeavours as a mode of organisational being for sustained learning.

There is a long educational history behind school-based enquiry. There is also a growing international evidence base of its centrality to school renewal and restructuring efforts (Barth, 1990; Glickman, 1993; Seashore Louis, 1994; Garmston & Wellman, 1997; Joyce *et al*, 1999) as well as to classroom improvement. And there is an increasingly varied range of voices calling for a reappraisal of the role of enquiry in school (and network) development. Some have centred upon the significance of teacher involvement because of their 'user community' role (Hargreaves, 1996) or because 'only teachers are in a position to create good teaching' (Stenhouse, 1984); others have criticised the unacceptable divide between the communities of research and those of practice (Kennedy, 1997; Hargreaves, 1998; Hillage *et al*, 1998);

many recognise the nature of teachers as professionals and their necessarily central role in the development of educational environments (Senge, 1990; Stoll, 1996; Halsall & Carter, 1998; Wheatley, 1999; Mitchell & Sackney, 2000).

A further perspective is relevant to Networked Learning Communities. It is that networks respect and pay homage to each other's practice. They view the network as a potential unit of study. The source is collaborative enquiry. The regenerative processes of knowledge-creation, collective sense-making, knowledge-exchange and knowledge-utilisation are at the heart of organisational and professional learning and of networking activity.

There is another interesting background factor. The relative failure of educational reform endeavours between the 1970s and mid-1990s has led in the last few years to a reappraisal of the role of school-based approaches and their relationship to reform strategies (Fullan and Miles, 1992). The climate has changed. Centralisation has been accompanied by school level autonomies – in budgets, governance, internal policies and professional development practices. Both innovation and self-evaluation are back on the agenda - and enquiry is a vehicle not only to propel improvement, but also to unearth evidence of success in order to meet accountability expectations. Specific policy strands between the late 1990s and 2004 have further supported this knowledge-creating process through incentives for school-to-school learning (Beacon Schools, Specialist Schools, Training Schools, Advanced Skills Teachers); practitioner enquiry (Best Practice Research Scholarships, International Study Visits); the study of urban collaborative innovation (Education Action Zones, Excellence in Cities); and specific network initiatives (LIG, Primary Strategy Learning Networks, Foundation Partnerships).

All this is accompanied by a move away from traditional hierarchy as the dominant organisational form for schools, and away, too, from the individual school as the appropriate unit of study. We cannot build professional learning community by recycling a school's existing knowledge-base. So, constraining structures (both hierarchy and school boundaries) are being broken down. Models of lateral learning are increasingly being seen as one way to unleash creativity and build capacity. Networks are generating greater leadership density.

Enquiry is the key – yet it remains a problematic concept still for many practitioners.

The Nature of Enquiry in Networks
The word 'research' brings with it a number of associations related to rigour, reliability, validity, generalisability, ethical procedures, scale, objectivity – and so on. This think-piece is not about research. Network enquiry activity does not have to conform to these exacting standards. School-based enquiry is often 'good enough' research– which means generating enquiry designs that are valid and reliable in relation to their purpose and their context, rather than in relation to the purity of the knowledge, or its generalisability.

Schools (and therefore networks) are, of course, awash with routine data processing activity. They are data-rich institutions. Every time we mark a set of examination papers, for example, we are processing data. Every discussion activity between the staff about behaviour or absence is making sense of data. Examination results, internal assessments, questionnaire results, target-setting, review interviews and a thousand other activities all generate data. When talking about **enquiry for improvement** we are implying a process that transcends this routine level – which is more purposeful, more focused, more improvement orientated, more consciously collaborative. A useful taxonomy is offered by the following sequence:

> **Data -** is the term we use for the mass of routine or purposefully acquired material that we have available to us within a school.
>
> **Information -** is the meaningful material that we extract from available data because of its potential to inform our future actions and decision-making.
>
> **Knowledge -** is the transformation of data and information into shared, collectively owned and institutionally specific knowledge as a result of a process of social processing.

The process of extracting meaningful information from data is an enquiry skill – data processing - but the formulation of knowledge from this information is a more profound activity, and is the process which gives potency to collaboration. Collaboration in itself is not necessarily a particularly virtuous pursuit – other than for its value in creating social cohesion. Collaboration that involves reflection, dialogue and discourse built around information; which leads to the creation of institutionally relevant knowledge; and which subsequently translates it into improvement and planned intervention designs (with and on behalf of others) is a potent school development and professional learning activity. This is particularly true for school-to-school collaboration within networks.

Enquiry for network improvement involves purposeful, focused and informed engagement with the context of the schools in the network as a means of collaborative study and learning about practice - and with a view to designing together informed improvement interventions, both within classrooms and within the wider operations of the network's schools, arising from the knowledge created, the grounded theory generated and the contextual interpretations made.

Enquiry, then, is the generic term used to embrace research, review, survey work, monitoring, evaluation, and other purposeful data generating activities that are the central driver of 'networked learning'. Enquiry is the key vehicle for knowledge-creation.

Knowledge Creation – the implications
Student attainment scores can be raised by 'tactical' approaches - by tightening the screws, setting targets, introducing homework clubs, working harder, focusing tightly on test outcomes, and a range of similar strategies. We know that. What we also know is that deep-seated and long-term improvements in the educational experience for young people, in their achievements and in their self-esteem and attitude to learning, require substanbtive changes to the quality of learning. If students are to learn more, teachers will need to learn more, too. And for teachers continuously to learn, schools must become the sort of places where teachers study practice together, and where they study, too, the context of that practice – the school and the network – and the knowledge-base of our profession.

When we can be certain that our staff are expanding their capacities every year just because they work in a 'networked learning community', we will be on the way to establishing the schools as 'professional learning communities'. Such communities will have many of the following characteristics (NCSL, 2001):

- shared and aspirational professional values sharply focussed on both teaching and learning (i.e. pedagogy not content);
- informed leadership which embraces continuous learning;
- a willingness to engage with and to learn from theory and research;
- an openness to alternative ways of doing things;
- a capacity to share what schools know about their practice and to act on what has been learnt;
- a willingness to create space for staff to innovate and to work in partnerships, in flexible groups that empower professional learning;
- a recognition that learning occurs at all levels (from pupils, to support staff, to headteacher), often in diverse and unpredictable ways;
- use of external expertise to challenge thinking and extend the school and network's capacity to evaluate and to learn.

The key to such 'networked learning communities' lies in the collaborative study of practice. What we find in NLCs is a growing engagement in collective enquiry groups such as action learning sets, study groups or enquiry partnerships, and adoption of some of the tools and protocols that 'scaffold' good school-to-school enquiry, such as learning walks, research lesson study, accounts of practice, or collaborative leadership learning groups. Such joint activities help to make practice 'visible'. They make explicit the tacit. They facilitate learning across organisations and between schools. They support the conceptualisation and transfer of practice. They also provide environments in which teachers can coach and support one another to implement new ideas in their own contexts.

These are knowledge creating and knowledge-sharing habits. Enquiry involves learning to study the classroom learning environment and applying rigour, too, to the organisational and social context within which learning occurs. In turn this involves also connecting the network to the external knowledge-base. The network's schools become permeable to knowledge, so avoiding the recycling only of internal or potentially stagnant practice.

Finally, network enquiry involves paying attention to communication strategies, structural change and the technologies of knowledge transfer within and between schools. This means involving all staff and generating widespread ownership, building flexible alliances, valuing expertise above status, shedding redundant practices, reconceptualising time use and refocusing its allocation, so that when teachers gather together they create knowledge, study, make meaning, share expertise, report back on enquiry activity, plan, evaluate and programme future enquiry activity.

Enquiry habits make us aware of how much we do not currently know. Which teachers have the best rapport, and how do they achieve it? Who has the skills of classroom management, and what do these look like? Where are the most effective beginnings and ends of lessons and what are the characteristics of these? How is learning structured in our best classrooms? What does good questioning technique look like, and where is it happening? Why are the same students motivated in one classroom, but not in another? What is rapport, and how is it generated? What are the most motivating homeworks and why? We have poor knowledge maps. Many schools are poor at knowledge sharing, too.

The point is purposeful engagement with the world of the network's schools in a planned and collaborative way. This is in order to generate informed interventions or designs with a view to improving practice, based upon what we learn together. All change is a hypothesis; wrapping it around with enquiry gives it both a learning and an ethical orientation.

Enquiry - and the structural conditions that support it
There is a range of reasons why enquiry has been found to be a liberating force for change in networks. Some of these reasons can be simply stated:

- ❑ We cannot improve schools if we do not know them well. Studying schools is a vehicle for knowing.
- ❑ Enquiry is an activity without blame. Data is neutral.
- ❑ Enquiry creates energy to overcome inertia. The data from enquiry engages people in shared meaning-making and creates an evidence base that energises action and improvement.
- ❑ Collaborative enquiry is a social activity. Teachers working together on enquiry activities create a learning context for each other.
- ❑ Enquiry is of itself professionally developmental. It creates a context, too, that causes teachers to want to visit the theory and knowledge from external research in order further to inform school-based practice.
- ❑ As a vehicle for generating knowledge, enquiry becomes the means by which practice can be transferred and transformed.
- ❑ There is an equality of voice in enquiry, a parity – and enquiry is emancipatory for members of the school communities. <u>Asking someone for their views demonstrates that they matter</u>.
- ❑ Increasingly, schools are appreciating that understandings about learning can be drawn from student perceptions and insights the learner perspective.

This active engagement of community members within enquiry activity – both as data source and as active participant - has the effect both of liberating voice (the lived experience of the school) and of creating actively democratic contexts.

There is, of course, no end point to enquiry; it is a journey, a way of working, a metabolism, a mode of being, a process of continuous learning. As such, it requires new structural environments and organisational arrangements within which to operate - progressive re-design around the collaborative study of practice.

This works at two levels. Teachers engage in enquiry based around classroom practice, progressively seeking to study and improve what they do, to coach one another in the new practices that evolve and so to make learning experiences more powerful for young people. At the same time, enquiry takes place at the school and network level, ensuring that the schools adapt themselves to become increasingly supportive of this mode of working. Enquiry into changes at the level of school structures and processes becomes synergistic with enquiry into changes about teaching and learning (the structures and processes of the classroom). One without the other does not work. Classroom enquiries <u>on its own</u> will create isolated pockets of effective classroom practice, but not whole-school change. School level enquiry <u>on its own</u> can fail to permeate the insularity of classrooms.

Generating Wider 0wnership
Emily Calhoun (1994), in a seminal publication about action enquiry for school renewal writes: "After almost thirty years in various stages of burial, action research for school improvement is once again receiving national attention. Through school-wide action research, a school staff can develop the school as a centre of enquiry so that it is perpetually self-renewing. The formal collection of data, followed by group analysis and interpretation, can move the school community forward on the path it has elected to follow."

Involving groups of staff in collaborative enquiry in this way is professionally developmental for those who engage in it. However, this is insufficient for whole school or network improvement and renewal purposes. Somehow, enquiry happening, say, in two or three classrooms needs to be able to inform the practice of classrooms across the entire school and beyond, should the findings have sufficiently meaningful implications. t is not the scale of enquiry that is significant, but the quality of the knowledge generated. So, an enquiry activity designed for school or network improvement purposes may only involve a small group of staff, but it can have wide implications if it is being undertaken <u>by</u> an enquiry group, but <u>on behalf of</u> the wider community.

However, in order for this wider impact to occur, consideration needs to be given to developing widespread ownership right from the design stage. This has significant implications for the design of enquiry. Enquiry for school improvement is fundamentally different from research. Its purpose is not only to create knowledge, but also to lead to 'action designs' and to implementation strategies, and these are complex processes in both human and technical terms*.* The sort of questions that might need to be asked, therefore, in designing such enquiries are as follows:

- What is the focus (and why)?
- How much or how little should we embrace in the enquiry?
- With whom should we work?
- At what stages do we inform or involve a wider contingent of staff?
- Who needs to be involved in making meaning from the data?
- Who should have responsibility for deciding upon recommendations?
- Who will be involved in implementing changes?
- How do we ensure that we connect throughout the process with all those who might be involved in implementation?
- Do we wish to create further enquiry out of the implementation phase, too?
- Are the recommendations generalisable beyond the enquiry environment?

Making Shared Meanings

Earlier mention was made of the stages in moving from data to information and subsequently to knowledge. The knowledge-creation element is a social process of shared meaning-making. An enquiry with an action and, therefore, ownership and implementation orientation will need to consider certain questions with particular care, if shared meanings are to arise from the process:

- Who should be involved in the enquiry design?
- Who should be involved in refining the focus of the enquiry?
- Who should we engage in the activity and at what levels?

- How do we ensure that those who might ultimately be affected by our outcomes are 'properly' involved in the process?
- How will we know when our data is "good enough"?
- How do we ensure that we connect throughout the process with all who might be involved in implementation?
- How do we avoid people feeling that they have been used as a data source but are disempowered from involvement in key decisions?
- How and when do we connect with decision-makers?
- How do we ensure that the process and subsequent decisions are status free?

These are simple questions, but represent practical challenges. Change is a technically simple but socially complex process! Nor, of course, do they really reflect the true complexity – which surrounds the issue of giving the entire constituency (school or network) ownership of the process (rather than just the product) of enquiry. It is unlikely that a staff group presented with the results of someone else's enquiry will be influenced by the outcomes – sincere as the study group may be. For this reason enquiry for improvement should be a process whereby all staff are involved in the <u>emergent</u> process. In other words, there is a need to optimise the awareness that an enquiry is being conducted for the whole staff and there should be opportunities for input at all stages. <u>Enquiry for improvement is a high-level interpersonal and communication issue.</u>

A Case Study – how might this look in practice?
Organisationally, the formal roles and responsibilities, the committee structures and the decision-making processes of schools (especially secondary schools) have evolved in relation to structural hierarchies designed to support efficiency, stability and functional effectiveness. Put another way, staff are often appointed to roles which are perceived as being leadership roles, but which in effect involve the management of structural units. In addition, these same structural arrangements, well suited to vertical communication, are virtually resistant to lateral communication or learning (Wilson, 1994). Different operational units within the same school tend to have very poor histories of exchanging practice or learning from one another. School–to–school learning habits are even worse.

Networked Learning Communities have the opportunity to create alternative structural arrangements compatible with the concept of a professional learning community and built around enquiry partnerships. This comprises establishing cross-school and cross-network study groups of staff. Such arrangements form 'temporary membership systems' (fluid teams of staff) focused upon enquiry and development activity. Bringing together teachers (and support staff) from a variety of roles and institutions, with a range of experience in this way creates a relatively 'status free' arrangement for the study of learning and learning environments.

Enquiry groups (or 'knowledge management group', or 'filter group' or 'enquiry collaborative', to use some of the examples of titles so far used in NLCs) become the educational equivalent of a research and development capacity for the group of schools, working alongside and integrating with existing structures. Such group unlock creativity and leadership potential, often stifled within formal structures, and open up new and flexible collaborations of staff customarily restricted within formal subject or key stage arrangements. Such 'enquiry collaboratives' can further break down into 'action enquiry sets', each committed to studying connected aspects of a school's practice more widely within the network – on behalf of the entire staff body. Certain key features are likely to characterise the work of these partnerships:

- The group is likely to be jointly led by staff chosen for their commitment to the approach, their change-agent skills and their ability to work flexibly and creatively.
- The partnerships will not only study aspects of the school or network's practice, but will apply the same enquiry and learning principles to accessing the external knowledge-base (both theory and research within the field and best practice from other schools and networks) in support of their work.
- Each partnership will seek to ensure that those who contribute to their study – or who are likely to be affected by it – are involved also in making meaning from the data and engaging with any subsequent implementation planning.

- Both the overall 'collaborative' and the individual partnerships will also commit to connecting continuously with the wider staff, students, parents and governors, as appropriate, in order that all can share the emergent journey.
- In turn, schools restructure time to create shelter conditions for the work, and facilitate opportunities for each partnership to connect with formal consultation and decision-making structures.

Such a continuous process progressively builds the capacity of the network as a centre of enquiry. It gradually expands the knowledge-base within the schools. It provides a vehicle for discourse and for the development of critical language for the discussion of practice. It creates a natural purpose for the network to become permeable to learning from outside its boundaries and a location and a focus for external expertise and facilitation. Beyond all these factors, the enquiry process also progressively leads to redesign imperatives built around the increasing importance to the work of knowledge-sharing, study, observation, coaching, intervisitations and collaborative problem-solving.

Some conclusions about leadership
In the introduction to this paper mention was made of a number of key purposes, one of which was to demystify and illuminate the enquiry process for those involved in the facilitation of networks and the leadership of school improvement endeavours. There are some specific aspects of the leadership dimension that are worth making explicit.

The first relates to the 'meta-leadership' role of the network co-leaders and school headteachers in acting as advocates and gatekeepers for progressive cultural and structural change. All the evidence suggests that this just cannot happen in schools without headteacher leadership of a high order. Networks offer a vehicle for sharing and learning together around these themes, too. The second concerns the early facilitation role for network facilitators and co-leaders in getting things started, ensuring that new practices become embedded, identifying key personnel, creating time and shelter conditions and connecting enquiry activity with the wider community within and beyond each school. A third relates to the particular skills required of those who lead enquiry groups – the creativity, technical skills, learning hunger, problem-framing and problem-solving abilities, humility, humour, empathy and change agentry orientation. These are complex skills, but we know that our schools contain committed professionals eager and able to undertake the task.

Beyond these obvious 'levels' of leadership, though, lies the real leadership agenda explored within this paper. This relates to the genuinely potent potential of school-wide collaborative enquiry – to empower all staff, at all levels, to become interchangeably leaders and followers, partners and participants, in the use of enquiry and the creation of knowledge for school renewal and for the enhancement of children's learning.

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