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Key Features in Networked Learning Communities¹ – Brief Descriptions and Questions to Consider

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Purpose and Focus

In our investigation of networked learning communities, we have learned a good deal about how purpose and focus can influence the work over time. Our understanding of the literature is that having a fundamental and clear organizational purpose is critical to the success of professional learning communities and of networked learning communities. In a general sense, successful educational change is driven by a pervasive commitment to improving education for all that includes raising the bar and closing the gap of student achievement, treating people with respect, improving the environment for learning and changing the context for learning at all levels (Fullan, 2004).

In addition to having a deep and abiding conviction that education can make a difference, improved learning needs to be the dominant and overarching organizational mission in any improvement effort (Bryk et al., 1999; Firestone & Pennell, 1997; Hopkins & Levin, 2000). A learning focus is likely to have a more direct impact if it is *focussed* in ways that are concrete and useful (Timperley & Robinson, 2003), compelling, challenging and shared (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996; Bryk et al. 1999; Firestone & Pennell, 1997).

A compelling learning focus is based on evidence that it can have significant impact on teaching practices and student learning. Not all foci are equally worthwhile and some are relevant in some contexts but not in others. Determining a focus involves more than choosing a “good” idea or someone’s pet initiative. Networked learning communities are intended to “ratchet up” the effect of schooling and to prepare students for the knowledge society that they will live in. Simply changing structures is not enough to change (improve) practice (Wohlstetter & Smith, 2000; Elmore, 2002). Networked learning communities need to choose the “right” focus for the participating schools, given their particular context and history and what is known (explicit knowledge) about innovations that are high leverage in fostering student learning (Marzano et al., 2001). David Hargreaves (2003) describes this process as “disciplined innovation” – the continuing

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identification of high leverage best practices and in-depth interaction conducive to transferring best ideas into practice.

A challenging focus is one that involves reconceptualising and making changes to existing practice and structures, legitimating the change process, making the status quo more difficult to protect and offering opportunities for joint attention to issues that are larger than any one school could address alone (Timperley, 2004).

Having a learning focus inscribed on a piece of paper is not enough. The learning focus is just the beginning to set the parameters that give principals and teachers direction for their learning and their work. As they proceed, they need to become knowledgeable about the core components of their chosen initiative so that they can integrate them into the every day practice and ensure that they respect the intents of the initiative rather than inadvertently eliminate or erode them (Crandall et al., 1986; Timperley, 2004). This latter point is particularly important given Lieberman's (2004) findings that networks are often in a constant struggle to hold onto a particular focus while participants want solutions to their current problems:

- **How closely is the network focus linked to teaching and learning?**
- **Is there research-based evidence that the network focus enhances teaching and/or learning?**
- **How closely is the network focus connected to the needs of the students?**
- **How explicit is the network focus? Can participants describe what they intend to “do” in detail so that it is concrete and useful to others?**
- **Is the network focus widely shared as a priority in the network schools?**
- **How challenging is the focus? Will it foster new thinking and changes in practices?**
- **What do participants need to know to understand this focus better?**

Leadership

Networked learning communities include many levels of leadership, both formal and informal. Although the leadership literature continues to emphasise the role of principals in successful change and instructional improvement, leadership models are increasingly focusing on what Rowan (1990) called “network” patterns of control, where leadership activities are distributed across multiple people (Smylie & Denny, 1990; Heller & Firestone, 1995). Allen and Cherrey (2000) make a compelling case for leadership in networks to extend over many different people engaged in a myriad of activities:

Leadership in organic systems is not the kind of leadership that one person can do. It is leadership that requires many people – a leader-full organisation. In an organic system, one person cannot control the system, nor can one person fully understand it. Therefore, models of collaborative, shared, or multi-level leadership become more important and critical in organic organisations. Developing the capacities of others becomes essential in building a leader-full organisation.

Leadership in networked learning communities is multi-faceted with both formal leaders (e.g. principals) providing leadership by encouraging and motivating others, setting and monitoring the agenda, sharing leadership and building capacity. At the same time, networked learning communities encourage a broad-base of leadership in schools and across the network, with many people with and without formal positions of authority providing a range of leadership functions such as leading particular initiatives, participating in collaborative groups and sharing their knowledge with others.

- **Has the admin. team involved the staff in a process for determining or refining a focus for the school?**
- **Are staff members involved in leadership activities like setting goals, coordinating or facilitating programs, etc.?**
- **Do staff members actively work to enable colleagues to have access to resources or the flexibility to participate in professional activities (e.g., team meetings)?**
- **Do staff members participate in committees or teams beyond the school?**

Relationships

Relationships form the threads or the ‘connective tissue’ of networked learning communities (Allen & Cherrey, 2000; Church et al., 2002) and provide the social capital that allows people to work together over time and exceed what any of them could accomplish alone (West-Burnham & Otero, 2004)..

Relationships create a common language and a sense of shared responsibility, provide channels for communicating and disseminating information to one another about network members’ expertise, and develop readiness to trust one another (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001; West-Burnham & Otero, 2004).

Trust is a key condition of productive relationships. Indeed, Bryk and colleagues (1999) found that social trust among members of staff was considerably the strongest facilitator of professional community. They propose that a base level of such trust may be necessary for a professional community to emerge, but working and reflecting together can build trust and strengthen relationships. In relationships, conflict is inevitable –and, as we will see, valuable - but robust and trusting relationships amongst network members can allow them to work together even when they have different orientations and views (Lieberman and Grolnick, 1996).

- **Do staff members have a common language about professional practice?**
- **Are staff members aware of the expertise of others?**
- **Do staff members feel responsible for ensuring that that they are all doing their professional best?**
- **Do staff members trust one another and believe in one another’s integrity?**
- **Do staff members feel as if they can depend on one another?**

Collaboration

Collaboration encompasses much more than relationships. It is intensive interaction that engages educators in opening up their beliefs and practices to investigation and debate.

When colleagues engage in a dynamic process of interpretation and evaluation of practice they enhance their own practice and that of the profession. This kind of collaboration allows people to address tough problems of teaching (Firestone & Pennell, 1997), build commitment through group understanding (Crandall et al., 1986; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1996), solve issues of mutual concern (Wohlstetter & Smith, 2000) and spread innovations beyond individuals and single sites (Smith & Wohlstetter, 2001).

Judith Warren Little (1990) offered a useful four-fold taxonomy for examining collaboration: storytelling and scanning for ideas; aid and assistance; sharing; and joint work.

- In **Storytelling and Scanning for Ideas** the contacts are informal and teachers make occasional forays in search of specific ideas, solutions and reassurances. They gain information and affirmation in the quick exchange of stories, casual camaraderie and friendships that occur at a distance from the classroom. In this case, teachers do not feel as if there are any problems to be resolved and they exercise personal preference in who they talk with and how they use the information.
- **Aid and assistance** occurs when mutual aid or helping is readily available. Questions are interpreted as requests for help and there is the expectation that colleagues will give one another help and/or advice, as well as concern and sympathy, but not interfere in another's work in unwarranted ways. Sometimes the expression of empathy even has the potential to dissuade teachers from more analytic examinations of practice.
- In **sharing** of methods and materials or the open exchange of ideas and opinions, people make aspects of their work accessible to others and expose their ideas and intentions to one another. Sharing does not usually extend to commentary on curriculum, learning, and instruction.
- **Joint work**, as Warren-Little describes it, involves "encounters among teachers that rest on shared responsibility for the work of teaching (interdependence), with their motivation to participate grounded in needing each other's contributions in order to succeed in their own work and a confidence in the others' competence and commitment.

Collaboration can be a powerful mechanism for changing ideas and practices, particularly when it involves joint work that includes a balance of personal support with critical inquiry about present practice and future direction (Borko, 2004; Hudson-Ross, 2001) and sustained scrutiny of practice but is not always easy. In fact, moderate conflict is essential for the development of high joint benefit, and the desire to avoid conflict can undermine this outcome (Engestrom, 1999).

- **Do staff members discuss professional issues regularly? Are the issues directly tied to curriculum, learning, and instruction?**
- **Do staff members work together to solve professional problems?**
- **Do staff members seek out and offer professional advice to one another?**
- **Do staff members observe one another's teaching and offer commentary?**
- **Are staff members open to feedback from their colleagues?**

Inquiry

Systematic analysis of the situation and professional reflection allow you to think about where you are, where you are going, how you will get there and then turn around and rethink the whole process to see how well it is working and make adjustments (Earl & Katz, 2002, 2005).

Human beings typically work hard (mentally) to make sense of new ideas by making them fit with what they “know” already, but moving beyond existing mental models is a fundamental prerequisite to knowledge construction and new learning (Bransford et al., 1999). Collaborative inquiry can help overcome these limitations by providing diverse ideas, distributed knowledge and multiple perspectives for solving problems (Hakkarainen et al. 2004).

Little (2005) references a large body of research suggesting that conditions for improving learning and teaching are strengthened when teachers collectively question ineffective teaching routines, examine new conceptions of teaching and learning, find generative means to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict, and engage actively in supporting one another’s professional growth. The enquiry processes of questioning, reflecting, seeking alternatives, and weighing consequences promote the “transparency” of what otherwise might remain unobservable facets of practice, making tacit knowledge visible and open to scrutiny (Earl & Katz, 2002; Little, 2005).

Collaborative inquiry creates an opportunity for educators to search for and consider both explicit and tacit knowledge in order to investigate practices and ideas through a number of lenses, to put forward hypotheses, to challenge beliefs, and to pose more questions. Explicit knowledge is formal encoded knowledge; tacit knowledge is personal subjective knowledge that is embedded in individual experiences, actions, intuitions and values.

- **Do staff members discuss one another’s views about teaching and learning?**
- **Does the staff systematically use data and evidence to make decisions?**
- **Do staff members share and draw on research about teaching and learning to influence their practices?**
- **Do staff members learn from failed initiatives?**
- **Do staff members consider a range of alternatives before making decisions about teaching?**

Accountability

Accountability is the watchword of education, with policy makers demanding that schools focus on achieving high standards for all students, and requiring evidence of their progress (Fullan, 1999). Both external and internal accountability have a role to play in how change happens.

External accountability in networked learning communities means being open and transparent in showing policy makers and the public what they are doing and how well it is working. Strong external accountability systems can also contribute to the achievement of a widely shared sense of purpose, create a sense of urgency, provide “pressure” for change, and offer a forum for conversation about the work of schools.

Internal accountability is a process of using evidence to identify priorities for change, to evaluate the impact of the decisions, to understand students' academic standing, to establish improvement plans and to monitor and assure progress (Herman & Gibbons, 2001). As Elmore (2002) says:

Knowing the right thing to do is the central problem of school improvement. Holding schools accountable for their performance depends on having people in schools with the knowledge, skill, and judgment to make the improvements that will increase student performance.

Internal accountability is what moves the agenda from schools where teachers and leaders are working hard and showing enthusiasm for change, to schools that are constantly engaged in careful analysis of their beliefs and their practices, to help them do things that they don't yet know how to do.

- **Do staff members accept responsibility for the improvement process?**
- **Do staff members communicate with each other about how well students in the school are doing and about school improvement activities?**
- **Do staff members communicate with parents and the community about how well students in the school are doing and about school improvement activities?**

Building Capacity and Support

Harris (2001) defines capacity building as being concerned with creating the conditions, opportunities and experiences for collaboration and mutual learning. Years of school improvement research have shown that improving schools are ones that take charge of change, rather than being controlled by it (Rosenholtz, 1989; Hopkins, Ainscow & West, 1994; Stoll & Fink, 1996). As Senge (1990) describes it, a learning organisation is one that is 'continually expanding its capacity to create its future'. In networked learning communities the focus is on creating the conditions to support individual and collective learning through all of the processes described in the previous key features. Building capacity depends on intentionally fostering and developing the opportunities for members to examine their existing beliefs and challenge what they do against new ideas, new knowledge, new skills, and even new dispositions (Stoll, Fink & Earl, 2003). When networks are focused on learning, they intentionally seek out and/or create supporting activities, people and opportunities to push them beyond the status quo within their school and network development needs.

- **Is there support for staff members to learn about new initiatives and participate in ongoing professional learning?**
- **Are staff members involved in ongoing professional learning?**