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## Overview

Networks and professional learning communities of teachers, principals, schools, and even districts have become a pervasive mechanism in education for reaching beyond traditional boundaries. Some networks are formally organized around a common goal, whereas others unite schools into a common organizational structure. Some networks are intentional in their origins and organization, and some are informal, arising in spontaneous ways. Although many positive characteristics are attributed to networks, there is still very little direct investigation of how networks function.

In 2004, we began an evaluation of England's Networked Learning Communities Program - 137 self-selected networks, involving over 1500 schools. The focus of our evaluation has been on identifying promising features and processes as they are being implemented in networked learning communities, and ascertaining the importance of these features to the success of educational networks generally.

We began with the end in mind. What is it that networked learning communities are intended to accomplish? In our analysis, it became clear that networked learning communities are based on the conviction that when educators work together, they will *create new knowledge and spread it to others*. Once the knowledge is created and shared, the expectation is that it will *influence practices* – change what educators do in their schools and classrooms and how they do it. Ultimately, the changes in practices are intended to have an *influence on students* to enhance their learning and their long-term success.

Our next stage was identifying important features of networks that could enable the creation and sharing of knowledge. Our analysis identified seven key features: purpose and focus, relationships, collaboration, inquiry, leadership, accountability, and capacity building and support. Here's what we learned, along with some questions to consider about each of the features:

## **Purpose and Focus**

Having a clear purpose is critical to the success of 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, this purpose must be *focussed* in ways that are concrete and useful, compelling, challenging, and shared.

A compelling learning focus is based on evidence that it can have significant impact on teaching practices and student learning. Determining a focus involves more than choosing a "good" idea or someone's pet initiative. Networked learning communities need to choose the "right" focus for the participating schools, given their particular context and history and what is known explicitly 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 identification of high leverage best practices.

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).

The learning focus is just the beginning to set the parameters that give principals and teachers direction for their learning and their work. Educators 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 (Timperley, 2004).

## **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 leadership activities that are distributed across multiple people. Allen and Cherrey (2000, p. 96) 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.

Formal leaders provide 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.

## **Relationships**

Relationships form the ‘connective tissue’ of networked learning communities (Allen & Cherrey, 2000) and provide the social capital that allows people to work together over time and exceed what any of them could accomplish alone. In relationships, people 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 (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 trust may be necessary for a professional community to emerge, but working and reflecting together can build trust and strengthen relationships. In relationships, conflict and dissonance 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).

## **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, build commitment through group understanding, solve issues of mutual concern, and spread innovations beyond individuals and single sites.

Judith Warren Little (1990) offered a four-fold taxonomy that we've found useful for examining collaboration in our analysis:

- 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, materials, ideas and opinions, people make aspects of their work accessible to others and expose their ideas and intentions to one another. This

kind of 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, 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”. It is the kind of collaboration where ideas are put on the table for discussion, analysis, challenge and debate, in the service of a “better way”.

Collaboration can be a powerful mechanism for changing ideas and practices, particularly when it involves joint work that includes a personal support, critical inquiry about present practice and future direction, and sustained scrutiny of practice, but is not always easy. In fact, moderate conflict and dissonance is essential for new learning, and the desire to avoid conflict can undermine this outcome (Engestrom, 1999).

## **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, in press). Human beings 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. Collaborative inquiry can help overcome these limitations by providing diverse ideas and multiple perspectives for solving problems.

Little (2005) references a large body of research suggesting that conditions for improving learning and teaching are strengthened when teachers collectively question teaching routines, examine conceptions of teaching and learning, find ways to acknowledge and respond to difference and conflict, and engage in supporting one another’s professional growth. The inquiry 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. Collaborative inquiry creates an opportunity for educators to consider both

explicit and tacit knowledge in order to investigate issues through a number of lenses, to put forward hypotheses, to challenge beliefs, and to pose more questions.

## **Accountability**

Accountability in networks is both external and internal. External accountability in networked learning communities means being open and transparent to the public about what network members 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). It 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.

## **Building Capacity and Support**

Capacity building includes 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. Senge (1990) describes a learning organisation as one that is continually expanding its capacity to create its future. In networked learning communities this means creating the conditions to support all of the processes described in the previous key features. Building capacity depends on intentionally fostering opportunities to examine existing beliefs and practices and challenge them against new ideas, new knowledge, new skills, and even new dispositions. 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.

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