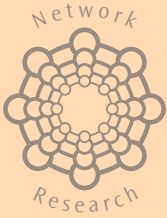
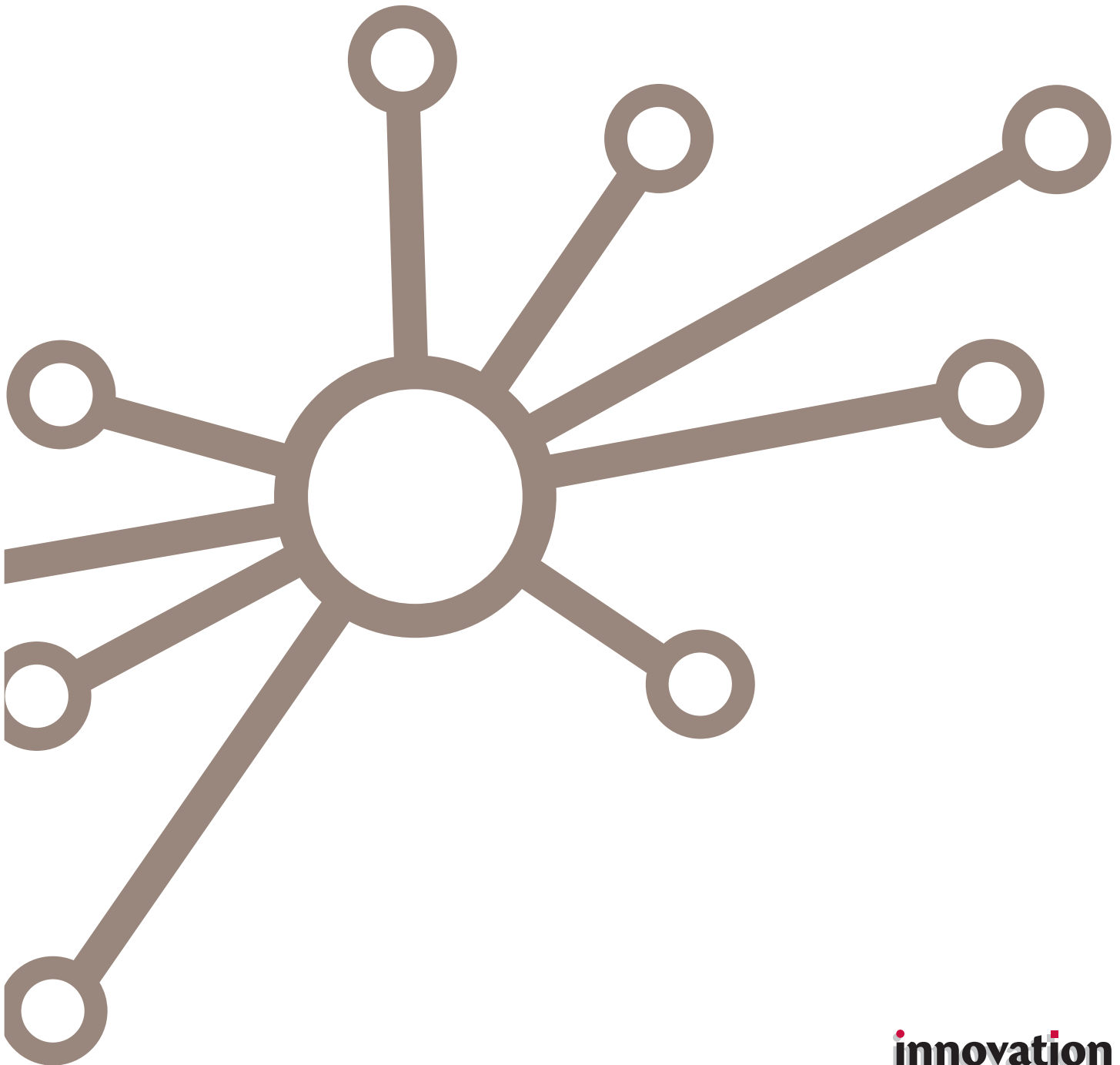
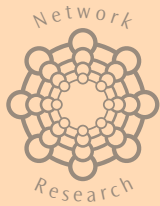


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What makes a network a learning network?





What makes a network a learning network?

Some key messages for network leaders from phase two of the external evaluation of NCSL's Networked Learning Communities programme

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Edited by Julie Temperley

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Finally we would like to extend our most sincere thanks to the 20 network schools that hosted the interview teams during February 2005 you know who you are. Thank you.

Introduction

Evaluating learning networks

In spring 2005, nearly 100 hour-long interviews were conducted with school leaders and practitioners who participated in the NCSL Networked Learning Communities programme. At the same time, an extensive review of the international research literature about school learning networks took place. Together, these activities comprised phase two of the external evaluation of the Networked Learning Communities programme. One of the outcomes of phase one, an international symposium on learning networks, was published as *International perspectives on networked learning* (NCSL, 2005). The final phase of the evaluation, looking at the impact of learning networks for pupil learning outcomes, including attainment, is taking place in 2005–2006 and the results will be available in autumn 2006. The evaluation was commissioned by the DfES, the Innovation Unit and National Strategies and led by Aporia Consulting Ltd, which is based in Ontario, Canada.

Sharing the outcomes quickly and widely

A substantial report which analyses the outcomes of this second phase of the evaluation is available to download from the NCSL website at www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc. This summary document is designed to distil some key messages emerging from the evaluation for leaders of learning networks and those who support them. It is important to remember that these are interim findings of an extensive three-year study. However, the evaluation team and their sponsors recognise that, with the introduction of Primary National Strategy Learning Networks, Education Improvement Partnerships and other network-based initiatives, there is a significant audience for the outcomes of the evaluation now, and that there is a need to get these insights and ideas out into the system whilst they are at their most useful.

How to use this summary

Key features

Phases one and two of the evaluation identified seven key features of learning networks that appear to be significant.

Key features of learning networks

- 1 purpose and focus
- 2 relationships
- 3 collaboration
- 4 enquiry
- 5 leadership
- 6 accountability
- 7 capacity-building and support

Using the summary

On each page you will find:

- an explanation of one of the key features
- an example of the kind of theory or research that the evaluators found in their literature review and that relates to the key feature
- one or two examples of the kind of evidence from practice that emerged from the interviews about the key feature
- one or two references to follow up for further reading and to recognise the contribution that particular authors have made to the research evidence
- some challenging questions for network leaders to consider – questions that emerged as specific issues or tensions from the analysis of the research findings

Contributors to the practice evidence (ie the practitioners who were interviewed) were guaranteed anonymity so we would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge all their contributions here.

What are the key features and why are they key?

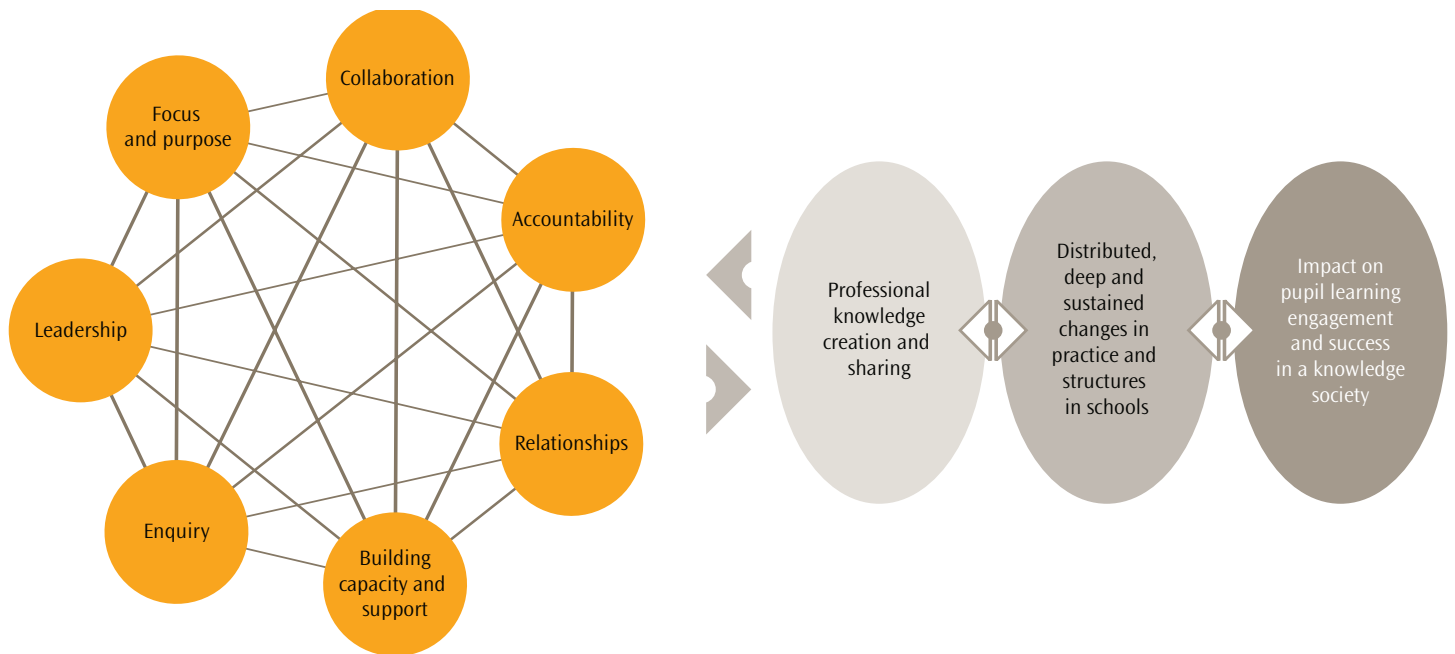


figure 1 Key features and outcomes

Learning networks of schools are a complex interaction between structures and activities. Each of the key features has a role to play and, like any complex system, the ways in which they combine and interact are innumerable and cannot be predicted in any particular context.

Complex systems theory is useful for understanding the workings of networks. A central characteristic of complex adaptive systems is the interdependence of the features, with each one being connected to all of the others. A change in any one invites changes in the rest.

For example, the nature of collaborative enquiry will depend also on the quality of relationships; capacity building and support will depend on the kinds of leadership that exist; the role of accountability will depend on the focus and purpose, and so on.

At this interim stage, we (the evaluation team) think we are learning that together these seven key features are essential ingredients in generating the interim outcomes of (i) creating and sharing professional knowledge and (ii) changing practice. In turn, these two are essential in generating the final, desired outcome – which is impact on pupil learning, engagement and success. Evidence from the evaluation so far suggests that the key features *are* contributing to changes in structures and practices for professional learning and knowledge exchange. The extent to which these are impacting on pupil achievement and engagement is the subject of phase three of the evaluation.

Key feature 1: Purpose and focus

Establishing an explicit statement of purpose about classroom practice, school improvement or student learning moves a professional network towards clear and purposeful actions. The process of identifying a focus can involve:

- challenging, reconceptualising and making changes to existing practice and structures
- legitimating the change process
- making the status quo more difficult to protect
- offering opportunities for joint attention to issues that are relevant for all of the schools in the network

Pause for thought...?

As **network leader**, how will you go about agreeing a purpose and a focus that is right for your context, and that has been shown to make a difference to pupils' learning?



References from research

David Hargreaves describes this process as 'disciplined innovation' - the continuing identification of high-leverage best practices and in-depth interaction conducive to transferring best ideas into practice.

Messages from practice

'There isn't a school in the land that can't claim teaching and learning as a focus. It goes without saying really, but (the question is) precisely what does that mean? And what's going to be the focus within that general category? In our case, Assessment for Learning narrows it down to a degree. And then having coaching as a means of addressing some of the issues in AFL seemed a good way of developing staff and linking in expertise that we had with that of other schools.'

What evidence will you use? What strategies do you have for securing collective agreement?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

Reference

Hargreaves, D, 2003, *Working Laterally: How Innovative Networks Make an Education Epidemic*, London, Demos/NCSS

Key feature 2: Relationships

Networks are a function of the ongoing and dynamic interactions between members of the group. These learning relationships contribute to the establishment, development and maintenance of the professional culture. Strong group cohesion is based on and engenders trust, mutual accountability and an agreed-upon sharing of power, which in turn strengthens relationships and commitment to shared goals and social norms.

Pause for thought...?

As **network leader**, what is your role in extending existing relationships that bring trust and security into the network, whilst also developing new ones that are challenging and bring a fresh perspective?



References from research

The argument that relationships are the 'connective tissue' of networks is explained in the idea of 'social capital'. Social capital, very simply, means that relationships matter. It refers to the character and quality of the social relationships within any organisation. When organisations have social capital, the people within them can engage in social interaction that allows them to work and learn together over time and exceed what any of them could accomplish alone.

Messages from practice

'(Relationships are) immensely strong and immensely supportive, both on a social and a formal level. I think, almost without exception, anyone in the network who had a problem wouldn't have any hesitation in grabbing advice from somebody else, phoning them up, dragging them round and looking quite strongly at what's going on.'

'When you get a bit desperate - when you think "I am not doing it the right way. Where am I going wrong?" It's nice to have someone to say "that's normal."

Please use this space to record your thoughts

References

Church et al, 2002, *Participation, relationships and dynamic change: new thinking on evaluating the work of international networks*, London, University College
West-Burnham, J & Otero, G, 2004, *Educational Leadership and Social Capital*, Incorporated Association of Registered Teachers of Victoria Seminar Series, August, 136

Key feature 3: Collaboration

Collaboration within networks is intended to engage practitioners in opening up beliefs and practices in order to provide them with opportunities to participate actively in the development of their own practice and that of the profession. This interaction allows for sharing within schools and across systems; it spreads innovations beyond discrete sites; it creates a dynamic process of interpretation and evaluation of practice between colleagues; and it fosters identification with the larger group, extending commitment beyond the single classroom or school.

Pause for thought...?

As **network leader**, how will you provide a safe environment for experimentation at the same time as providing the challenge of collaboration and struggle – to push the adults in your schools to be daring learners?



References from research

Judith Warren Little offers a useful taxonomy of collaboration, which ranges from “sporadic contacts and idiosyncratic affiliations among peers to joint work of a more rigorous and enduring sort”. Joint work, she describes as “encounters among teachers that rest on shared responsibility for the work of teaching, collective conceptions of autonomy, support for teachers’ initiative with a respect for professional practice and group affiliations grounded in professional work”.

Messages from practice

‘It’s really beneficial recognising that there is more than one way to do things. I feel privileged to be allowed to go into someone else’s classroom. You want them to feel it’s beneficial too, and that you’re not there to pass judgement. You want to challenge but not threaten, and give them a chance to think things through.’

‘There’s one teacher who is the ‘challenger’ and who constantly says: “Is this what we should be doing? Is this where the network should be going? Is this the point of us?”’

What cross-school groups will you establish to challenge traditional practices, to drive the network’s core purpose and to generate new ways of doing things across all schools?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

Reference

Little, J W, 1990, *The persistence of privacy: autonomy and initiative in teachers’ professional relations*, Teachers College Record, 91, 4 pp 509–536

Key feature 4: Enquiry

Enquiry is a fundamental tenet of networks that focus on learning. When networks need to know, the members are prepared routinely to investigate their work. Enquiry is the process for systematically and intentionally exploring and considering information from research, from experts and from each other, in support of decision-making and problem-solving. Collaborative enquiry involves thinking about, reflecting on, and challenging individual and collective experiences in order to come to a deepened understanding of shared beliefs and practices.

Pause for thought...?

As **network leader**, how will you support practitioners in your network in the development of the skills and dispositions they need to become adept at using data and evidence to inform decisions and practice and to stimulate enquiry habits?



References from research

Systematic analysis of the situation and professional reflection are regarded as core activities for both individual and collective construction of meaning. We call this having an enquiry habit of mind - a habit of using enquiry and reflection to think about where you are, where you are going, how you will get there and then turning around and rethinking the whole process to see how well it is working and making the necessary adjustment.

Messages from practice

'I think probably the best thing I have gained from being in any sort of network really is the ability to be more reflective, but why we're doing it - and how we might do it better as a result of having seen other people doing things and having visited other settings.'

'In terms of impact, it is not a gut feeling that (something) has worked well. We know if it has worked well - the data are there.'

Please use this space to record your thoughts

References

- Katz, S, Sutherland, S & Earl, L, 2002, Developing an evaluation habit of mind, *Canadian Journal for Program Evaluation*, Vol 17, 2, pp 103-119
- Earl, L & Katz, S, 2005, *From Accounting to Accountability: Harnessing Data for School Improvement*, Corwin Press

Key feature 5: Leadership

Leadership in Networked Learning Communities is both far-sighted and pragmatic and is different throughout the life-cycle of the network. Leaders in networks develop the vision and focus, provide support (intellectual and instrumental), monitor development, disseminate information and provide buffers from challenges posed by the larger environment. 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.

Pause for thought...?

As **network leader**, how will you decide what forms of distributed leadership are consistent with the values and principles of your network?



References from research

Leadership in organic systems (such as a network) is not the kind of leadership that one person can do. It is leadership that requires many people – a 'leader-full' organisation. In a network, 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. Developing the capacities of others becomes essential in building a 'leader-full' organisation.

Messages from practice

'Truth is, we're all partially reliant on each other. Having taken on different tasks, it gives ownership for various things. Somebody might go off and do additional work for that area (for the network) and lead on else will lead on curriculum issues.'

'The real leadership in the network comes from the headteachers. More and more of our headteachers have a particular function – running focus groups, leading activities and so on. There's probably a good half of them who have actually got quite a central role in leading a bit of the network in different ways.'

How will you liberate the leadership potential across your network for the benefit of all schools and all children?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

Reference

Allen, K & Cherrey, C, 2002, *Systemic Leadership: Enriching the Meaning of our Work*, Boston, University Press of America

Key feature 6: Accountability

Accountability within networks includes both providing transparent and informative statements of account to others, and active self-monitoring to support and challenge the work of the group in the process of striving for improvement. Accountability in a learning network also implies a sense of responsibility for the quality of work and of value for pupils across all the schools.

References from research

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, skills and judgement to make the changes that will improve student performance.

Messages from practice

'We knew what we did had to be of high quality. If you're passing things on to other teachers, materials have to be of high quality. You don't want to let them down. I think that it's valuable to have people from other schools asking you why you did that and why you didn't do this, because it puts you on your mettle. You suddenly have to explain why you did something - you know, to be accountable for your actions.'

'We have to measure impact as well as we can in the school. We listened to whether pupils liked the approach. Did they find it easier? Did they feel more motivated to learn that way? But we also looked at exam results.'

Pause for thought...?

As network leader, what is your strategy for monitoring the quality of what gets shared in your network?



How will you use baseline achievement and hold others in the network to account? How do you show that the network adds value for pupils?

Please use this space to record your thoughts

Reference

Elmore, R, 2002, *The Limits of "Change"*, Harvard Education Letter Research online <http://www.edletter.org/past/issues/2002-jf/limitsofchange.shtml>

Key feature 7: Building capacity and support

Significant change in schools is a function of high pressure and high support. Networking initiatives require planned strategies for building capacity for change and improvement within schools and between schools. When networks are focused on learning, they intentionally seek out people and create supporting activities and opportunities to push them beyond the status quo within their school and network development needs.

Pause for thought...?

As **network leader**, how will you ensure your network can capitalise on the diversity that exists within and outside schools to challenge ideas and encourage innovation?



References from research

Years of school improvement research have shown that improving schools are ones that take charge of change rather than being controlled by it. As Senge puts it: "a learning organisation is one that is continually expanding its capacity, to create its future."

Messages from practice

'In the first year, a number of staff said that they found it difficult to actually do (network activity), even though they knew what to do. So we had some training sessions. I provided support and when they knew that the support was there, a lot of their doubts evaporated.'

'The school was inward-looking, performance was declining and morale was low. As part of the reinvention of the school we had to become more outward-looking. We had to get ideas from elsewhere. We had to be more radical in our curriculum design and we needed to feed off ideas from other people. We needed to be part of that wider educational community.'

Please use this space to record your thoughts

References

Senge, P, 1990, *The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organisation*, New York, Doubleday

Further Reading

NCSL, 2005, *International perspectives on networked learning*, Key messages emerging from phase one of the external evaluation of NCSL Networked Learning Communities, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

NCSL, 2005, *Evaluating the Networked Learning Communities programme*, Summary of the overall approach to the evaluation, Nottingham, National College for School Leadership

Both documents are available to download at www.ncsl.org.uk/nlc

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Networked Learning Communities

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