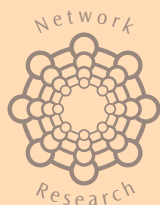


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# Understanding learning networks





## Understanding learning networks

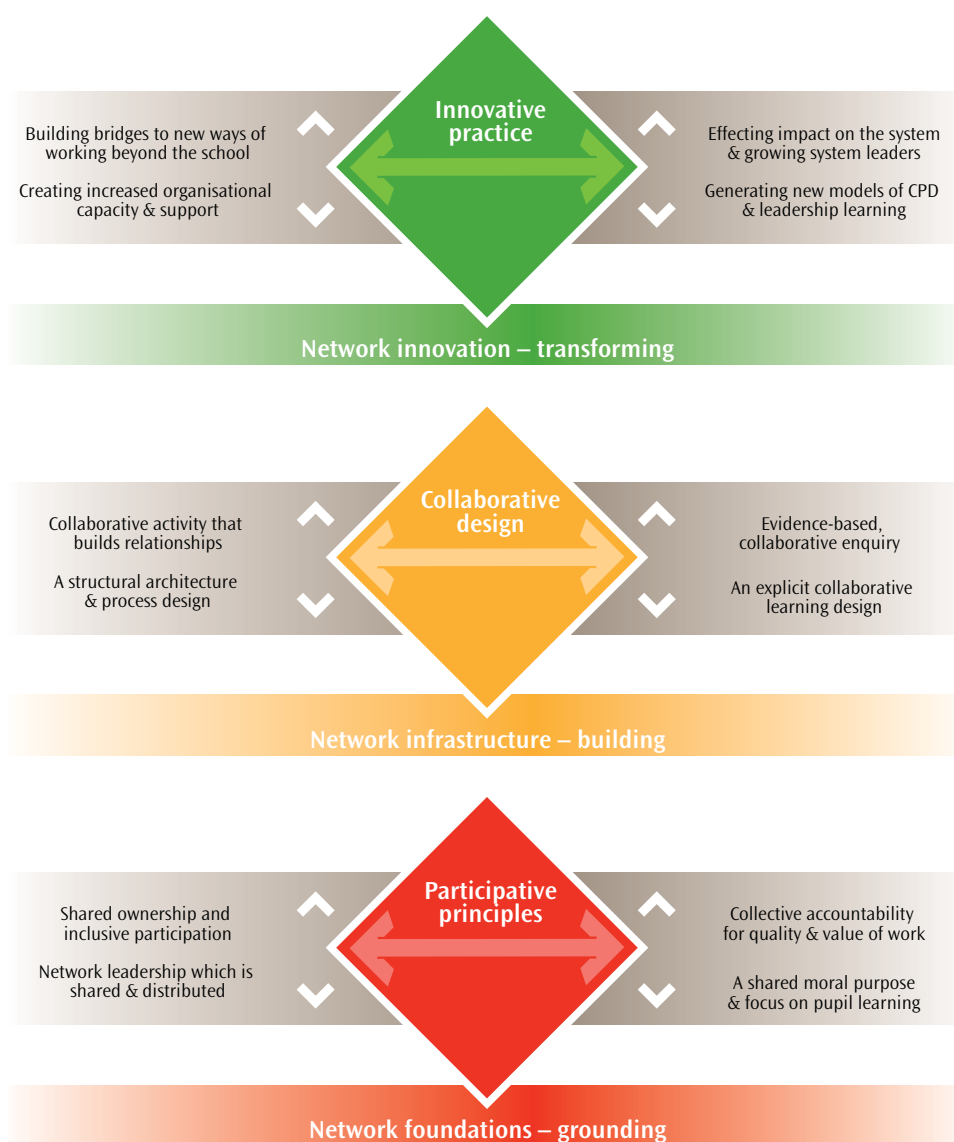
Some key messages for school and network leaders, policy-makers and others interested in exploring the evidence base on learning networks.

Karen Carter with Fred Paterson

From its inception, the best available theories of effective learning networks informed NCSL's Networked Learning Communities programme. Research, enquiry and evaluation studies conducted throughout the life of the programme (2002 – 2006) have built upon, and contributed further to the body of available public evidence. This paper distils the programme's learning into 12 building blocks which can assist in our understanding of successful school learning networks and what they look like in practice.

These building blocks can be represented as cohering interactively around three key features:

1. **Network foundations:** grounding participative principles
2. **Network infrastructure:** building a collaborative design
3. **Network innovation:** transforming practice through innovation



## Network foundations: grounding participative principles

1

**Network leadership which is shared and distributed**

Network leadership is far-sighted and pragmatic. It is focused on developing vision and focus and providing support and challenge. Building relationships and disseminating knowledge are key leadership tasks. There is an understanding that leadership can be fostered at all levels beyond those in positional roles and that future leaders can be grown through engagement with network activity. Through shared and distributed leadership, new opportunities for leadership are provided and new types of leaders emerge. Successful networks plan for distributed leadership from the earliest stage.<sup>1</sup>

2

**Shared ownership and inclusive participation**

Networks work to the degree that they bring people together with an idea that is attractive and engaging. Developing 'shared ownership', 'reach' and the will to commit to shared ideas and purposes is often more crucial than financial resources in sustaining networks. Successful networks cohere around inclusion – they adopt an inclusive approach to inviting participation and often leadership from a wide range of members within the learning community. The active participation of pupils and the validation of pupil voice and student leadership are key to inclusive practice in networks.<sup>2</sup>

3

**A shared moral purpose and focus on pupil learning and well-being**

Successful networks unite around a compelling idea or aspirational purpose, a shared belief that they can achieve more for their 'end users' together than they can alone. An underpinning moral purpose – a commitment to the success of all children – is central. Hence, an explicit focus on pupil learning is important – this provides the impetus for wide participation and provides networks with a unifying moral purpose. Pupil progression – attainment, achievement and well-being – is a fundamental driver of networking and collaboration. In networked learning communities (NLCs), pupil learning sits at the heart of an integrative networked learning design which embraces adult, leadership, school-wide, school-to-school and network-to-network learning.<sup>3</sup>

4

**Collective accountability for the quality and value of work**

Accountability within networks provides transparent and informative statements of account to others, and active self-monitoring to support and challenge the work of the network. It also implies a sense of responsibility for the quality of work and of the value to pupils across all the schools. Successful networks, from the outset, plan a collective, network evaluation strategy – identifying key milestones, success criteria and impact measures. They develop a collective accountability for the impact of network activity on the learning of children and other learners in the network.<sup>4</sup>

**Effective networks make a positive difference to pupils' achievement.**

### Network research

'Leadership of collaboration beyond the school has a positive impact on pupil achievement (Bell et al, 2006)<sup>5</sup>. Through effective networks, teachers and leaders have found real benefits for their teaching, their school and their pupils (GTCE, 2005).'<sup>6</sup>

'In the second year of the NLC programme in 2004, key stage 2 results improved more in NLC schools than they did in non-NLC schools nationally. In 2005, the same results were reflected in key stage 4 results (Crowe et al, 2006).'<sup>7</sup>

## Network infrastructure: building a collaborative design

5

**A structural architecture and process design**

Learning networks require a structural architecture built around collaborative learning functions. They purposefully design and adapt network processes to ensure maximum participation and sustain collaboration. They have specific structural characteristics which provide clarity about roles and resources and enable new or different leadership configurations to be built. This requires active support, facilitation, critical friendship and brokerage from both within and beyond the network. It also recognises that networks cannot be controlled by formal systems, they require a dense web of interpersonal connections, supported by an internal infrastructure to enhance learning.<sup>8</sup>

6

**Collaborative activities that build relationships**

School networks create an environment that fosters interdependent working and professional collaboration. Joint work groups engage with one another to learn together, to innovate and to enquire into practice. They enable honest professional exchange and create the conditions for complex relationships to work. Collaborative relationships build trust which is essential to the development of ideas – and ideas build network interest and increased participation. Collaborative activities which have proved particularly high-yield are: launch events and joint staff days; headteacher learning groups; shared professional development planning; shared evaluation and dissemination groups.<sup>9</sup>

7

**An explicit, collaborative learning design**

Successful learning networks demonstrate a principled commitment to a collaborative learning design. In NLCs the model of learning at the heart of this design – the ‘three fields of knowledge’ – creates a dynamic interplay between learning from the public knowledge base, knowledge derived from practice and the collaborative construction of new knowledge. This learning model is underpinned by four networked learning processes – learning from, learning with, learning on behalf of one another, and meta learning. This learning design has been influential in engaging network participants in purposeful collaborative activity and in supporting the processes of knowledge creation, exchange and transfer within, across and beyond networks.<sup>10</sup>

8

**Evidence-based, collaborative enquiry**

Enquiry is a fundamental tenet of learning networks. A key principle is enquiry-based practice – evidence and data-driven learning. In networks this involves developing collaborative enquiry approaches which generate network data intelligence and collective knowledge about professional practice and the leadership of learning. In networks engaged in the act of creating new knowledge together through collaborative work, network teacher enquiry projects have been one of the most common ways of spreading innovative practice into more classrooms and schools. Enquiry processes used include: action research; appreciative inquiry; networked learning study-visits; networked research lesson study; networked learning conversations.<sup>11</sup>

**Networks provide an effective context for enhancing teachers’ professional practice.**

### Network research

‘In a MORI poll (2004)<sup>12</sup> 75 per cent of teachers said that collaboration between their school and others has led to improvements in their own teaching and 85 per cent said that school-to-school collaboration had led to improvements in staff motivation.’

‘There is evidence from programme enquiry (Church et al, 2005)<sup>13</sup> of the relationship between improving pupil achievement and well-being and improving professional practice. Prime influencers in raising pupil attainment were identified as improvements in professional practice and transformation of leadership practice.’

## Network innovation: transforming practice through innovation

9

Creating increased organisational capacity and support

Networking initiatives require planned strategies for building capacity for change and improvement within and between schools. When networks are focused on learning, they intentionally seek out people to create supporting activities and opportunities to push them beyond the status quo. Networks provide participants with a rich resource of professional and leadership support. They have helped teachers, leaders and schools address problems they have struggled seriously with alone. The opportunities to share experience, expertise and thinking with other schools gives school leaders and other adults greater confidence to determine their direction.<sup>14</sup>

10

Building bridges to new ways of working beyond the school

Networks are a way to forge new and effective relationships between schools and other agencies required by the *Every Child Matters* agenda. They offer a 'new unit of meaning and engagement' which has given people the confidence to work beyond their zones of familiarity and comfort. Networks are creating new ways for schools to work with each other and with other partners, including those in local authorities and in multi-agency and community settings. Developing an understanding of the 'brokerage' roles of local authority partners, the characteristics of effective community leadership, the 'bridging' role of school leaders, and the network practices of system leaders, has been key to understanding the ways in which networks provide a means by which bridges can be built to new ways of working beyond the school.<sup>15</sup>

11

Generating new models of CPD and leadership learning

Networks provide a model for effective, sustained and highly motivating professional learning. Those who learn in networks can't conceive of a return to previous models. Continuing professional development (CPD) in school networks is more likely to be collaborative than individual and, therefore, more likely to offer learning gains for pupils as well as teachers. Networks have afforded unique and widespread opportunities for learning about leadership through practising it in partnership with others. Through the use of innovative approaches to collaborative learning, including the use of headteacher study groups, leadership learning forums and network enquiry groups (amongst others), new networked models of professional and leadership learning have emerged.<sup>16</sup>

12

Effecting impact on the system and growing system leaders

Networks provide a multi-agency vehicle for reform and can be capacity-building in so far as they are able to produce new knowledge and mutual learnings that can then feed back and inform public policy. In NLCs, a key indicator of impact at system level is increased capacity for change. Integral to this is a shift in attitude towards more rigour in questioning existing structures and practices. Collaboration has influenced the way network schools think and operate where, for example, the power of the network has been used explicitly to help individual member schools in difficulty. Emerging evidence suggests that networks are creating environments in which school leaders are responding to the challenge of leading and learning beyond their own schools. As a result, networks have been described as 'the proving ground for system leadership'. They create joint work arrangements that are developmental of leadership, making leadership more widely available and developing system leaders.<sup>17</sup>

Networks provide an effective context for developing leadership capacity.

### Network research

'NLCs encourage a broad base of leadership in schools and across networks. Networks build leadership capacity on an inclusive basis. Network participants, whatever their position, find opportunities to take on network leadership roles which would not have been available to them in the context of a single school (Earl & Katz, 2005, Ballantyne et al, 2006).'<sup>18</sup>

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