# DESPERATELY SEEKING FUSION: TWO PERSPECTIVES OF LEADING LEARNING IN A NETWORKED LEARNING COMMUNITY.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION: CONTEXT AND DISTINCTIVENESS

Leading a new network is a distinctive act, defined by a range of apparent paradoxes. The leader does not occupy a position of hierarchical power but needs influence if the network is to thrive. It is rooted in enquiry but uses advocacy to build its momentum. Networks cannot be managed, but they need management.

This paper seeks to describe what it means to lead a network that is attempting to establish itself as a viable and powerful source of learning and transformation. It relates aspects of two network leaders' work and seeks to contribute to a debate on:

- How networks can contribute to a focus on school improvement through the promotion of teacher learning

- The nature of leadership in locating this focus and the power of internal structures and processes to support this.

Throughout we have illustrated the piece with accounts of practice drawn from the Hartlepool Networked Learning Community and the Bransholme Networked Learning Community, Hull. Additional material is drawn from the experience of Darren Holmes as a network co-leader and a network facilitator inside the Networked Learning Communities programme.

Sources of data include author's learning journals, interviews with co-leaders (in Hartlepool, Bransholme and beyond) and interviews with teachers working inside networks of schools. The authors also engaged in a day of structured conversation to surface reflective accounts and organise the content of the paper. Additional material has been drawn from enquiry reports generated by the Networked Learning Communities programme.

Hartlepool Networked Learning Community includes 11 primary schools and one special school all within Hartlepool LEA, one of the smallest LEA s in the country. The majority of the schools work with children from communities with high levels of unemployment and social deprivation; *"Despite imaginative and successful regeneration initiatives the town epitomises the stark reality of third generation unemployment." (Hartlepool NLC submission, 2002)*

The schools which form Hartlepool NLC had only rudimentary links before they became part of this programme. Where connections pre existed they were focused on administrative issues and led by the Local Authority. The head teachers who form the steering group were the individuals who took the initiative to bid to become a Networked Learning Community. They made an open invitation to other schools in the Borough to join them.

The Bransholme Networked Learning Community is located in north Hull. Its 13 schools serve a very large area of municipal housing in very challenging circumstances. The network originates from a successful EAZ to which all the schools were very committed.

Jean Hart and Jack Harrison are the co-leaders in Hartlepool and Bransholme respectively. Both are head teachers with a track record of success in their own schools and have a wealth of experience in school improvement and the implementation of positive change. Importantly, both leaders were able to bring the vital commodity of professional credibility to the task of establishing new and thriving networks.

The co-leaders have a very keen awareness of the strength and potential of their communities yet retain a deep understanding of the difficulties faced. They approach co-leadership from a position of professional strength: they lead demonstrably good schools and hold a good understanding of how to take learning forward at a community level. They are innovative in their own practice, appreciative of others and proactive in their attempts to move things forward in the network. They are unafraid of well calculated risk.

Networks are distinctive organisational forms and their pervasiveness and influence is growing.

> "...networks are now the most important organisational form of our time, reshaping the activities of families, governments and businesses. They are increasingly where power is located; they are increasingly fundamental to any successful enterprise, and they challenge our notions of leadership" Valerie Hannon (2004)

Networked solutions in schools can be applied to a wide spectrum of issues. The range of foci of the NCSL Networked Learning Communities reveals the adaptability of collaborative effort. It seems that there are almost no areas of school life and professional learning that are beyond the reach of an effective network. By extension it follows that networks carry the potential to create benefits for a wide range of aspects of pupils' learning and progress. This reflects Karl's (1999 cited in Church et al 2003) view of networks as organising forms that carry potential for beneficial action in a range of spheres. Networks are capable of adding value to those engaged in them through:

- dialogue across diverse groups,

- ideas-sharing,

- addressing large scale problems that are beyond the capacity of individual organisations or people;

- overcoming isolation,

- increasing potential for political or social action;

- respecting diversity,

- linking the national to the local;

- being inclusive;

- flexibility and responsiveness;

- capacity to do more together than alone.

It is our contention that the final point carries the greatest significance. Networked solutions are complex, difficult to conduct and challenging to sustain. By their very nature they have a propensity to add value to those engaged if carried through to conclusion.

## 2. ESTABLISHING A NETWORK

The complexity of collaborative, cross-organisational working means that networked learning and action is a high order aspiration that is challenging to enact. Professionals in schools need a compelling reason to engage with it. The network needs to be in a position where it adds almost exponential value to the work of its member schools. To do this its focus needs to be upon some aspect of practice or learning that is beyond the capacity of individual schools. (Holmes and Johns-Shepherd 2005)

In Hartlepool's case the network converged around a compelling notion that individual school action, albeit robust and backed by coherent structures at LEA level, was no longer a sufficient lever to push attainment beyond the post literacy/numeracy plateaux. Something more was required to understand and then address the barriers to learning that pupils and teachers grappled with on a daily basis. The something that emerged was a networked approach to inter school enquiry.

This resonates with David Hargreaves' (2002 page 12) notion of network activity needing to find "high leverage", a requirement to turn maximum result from minimum effort. Networked solutions can be applied to small scale, localised issues; but if the ultimate purpose of the endeavour is to achieve a goal that is attainable without reference to a learning network this ought to be explored first. Fullan (2004 page 4) argues that "networks are not a panacea." Just because networks could provide the answer, doesn't mean that they necessarily should. Some things are simply better done in school. Alone.

The search for the points of high leverage is a core element of the network leader's task and networked learning appears well suited to engaging with issues that offer high levels of potential gain to schools. Where the capacity required to lever this gain is within the scope of an individual school the network becomes a conduit for sharing powerful practice. Where a group of schools combine to produce a gain that is beyond their individual capacities this becomes a 'networked learning experience'. The network combines to create new knowledge, understanding and practice and to produce results that were previously and otherwise beyond reach.

Key to this in Hartlepool and Bransholme were the core beliefs that,

- the attainment could rise ("we refuse to accept that 25% of our children can't be powerful and engaged learners").

- the attainment gap could narrow (attainment had risen remarkably across the town since 1997 but so had the gap between the most successful and least successful (and most advantaged and least advantaged)).

- the problem and the solution were systemic: it was located in schools rather than in communities or individual children?

- Pupils' experience of school and attitudes to learning could be enhanced: there could be a qualitative shift in the way that young people engage with their learning.

- Networks have potential to create leverage themselves by focusing innovation and harnessing and transferring powerful practices.

The network in Hartlepool provided the leverage for enquiry. The capacities for this activity were enhanced by a network that:

- made a diverse range of teacher learners available to one another

- provided enquirers with the time and space to meet together, work together and learn together around an aspect of their work that had an impact on the whole locality

- offered facilitation and external expertise for the enquiries

- marshalled publicly available knowledge in a timely and efficient way

- offered access to a range of rich and varied resource

- minimised the risk arising from isolated implementation of innovative high leverage processes and practices

The potential leverage is evidenced in the range of enquiry areas that teachers engaged with:

- ICT across the curriculum

- Stimulating writing

- Teaching and Learning

- Language Interaction in KS1

- Leading and Managing Learning

- Transforming Learning

- Child centred induction to smoother transition

- Life long learning teaching skills of independent learning

- Feeling safe and comfortable enough to make mistakes

- Parental support ("Knowing where the learner is right now")

- Pupil self esteem

- Inspirational teaching that motivates, engages and connects prior knowledge

- Motivating less able pupils

## 3. BEGINNING TO LEAD A NETWORK

*"Supportive, constructive and committed leadership is essential to the success of networks. Network leaders, working in very different school and partnership contexts, have to negotiate a problematic and constantly changing landscape of conflicting demands. Each network is unique; each faces its own challenges using its individual strengths. Leaders must be constantly vigilant for new opportunities or blocks, whether these surface from an external agency or internally because leaders themselves have not fully understood or adapted to network needs."(Spender 2004)*

Anderson and Kubiak (2004) have identified four inter-dependent dimensions of leadership activity which are relevant to a broad range of educational networks.

- Coordination and Planning (transactional)

- Development of people and processes (transformational)

- Creating evidence-led classrooms (instructional)

- Meeting emotional and social needs (moral leadership)

The networks in Hartlepool and Hull were formed around a desire for people who shared a common constituency of pupils to combine and collaborate to make a difference to pupil learning. Implicit in this is a notion of professionals across schools seeking to take responsibility for aspects of improvement that would benefit all pupils within a confined community. Onto this moral purpose they etched a strong commitment to a methodology that they saw as being binding on the network and carrying the potency to deliver the leverage they required. In Hartlepool this process was based around collaborative teacher enquiry. The Bransholme Networked Learning Community sought to develop work in coaching for leadership and pedagogy.

There appears something of an haphazard nature in the way that leaders in Hartlepool and Hull became involved in the enterprise of networked learning. Co leaders in Hartlepool came together more by accident than design. The leaders then forged a team that made good use of these factors and helped to push the network's agenda forward.

Once the leaders had been identified each served a different function that related to their individual skill set and professional interest. In Hartlepool and Hull there were similarities in the ways that this process was completed. Jean explains her induction and subsequent struggle to understand her role.

> *"I have had the pleasure of being at the centre of the activity,… quite accidentally, by agreeing to help write a submission, I ended up being on the steering group of four head teachers. Having accepted this challenge, I opted for the role of network to network consultant as I felt I had skills in this area and would enjoy the challenge. Over the course of the next frustrating nine moths I realise no one could really decide what the role should or could look like and I felt I had no clear role to offer my network. At this point I examined my usefulness to the network and discovered that my role was one of communication and accountability within our enquiry groups and being the "glue which stuck us together" (as our NCSL facilitator suggested) and the "organisational steel" (as I was dubbed by a fellow co-leader). More simply I kept us on task."*

Both networks' early development was assisted by the services of a paid consultant, although the work that these individuals undertook was different in nature. The presence of consultants may indicate a lack of security with the operation of the network but also a hard nosed judgement that a wider portfolio of skills was required at the outset of networked learning than could be mustered from within the identified leadership. Jack points out,

> *"The great thing about networking is that it never stops. It spreads into places you'd never imagine. We need to try to control this at a strategic role and tackle things in bite sized chunks. Part of the role is to know when you need someone else to make the difference. There's also a need for networks leaders to attempt to keep the contagion under some kind of control."*

He recognises another and more prosaic reason for adding to the managerial capacity of developing networks when he writes that,

> *"Some times the real life work of leading a school gets in the way."*

## 4. THE NATURE OF LEADING A NETWORK – STRUCTURES AND PROCESSES

The Hartlepool Network was clear about the route that they needed to take in order to achieve the highest leverage:

> "The route was to engage with research around a common focus on pupil learning. We wanted to make public knowledge accessible and create a bridge between what David Jackson (2002) has called the 'unacceptable chasm between communities of research and practice'."(Jean)

Jean undertook an organising function within the network;

> "As unofficial archivist for the Enquiry Groups I've learned so much about what builds success within a group and how we could have done things better.  I've been astounded by the dedication and commitment of teachers to learn from and with one another in order to benefit the children.  Some groups have flourished and some have floundered….did we make the right choice in focussing our resources on teacher enquirers? Yes– without a shadow of a doubt."

Jean saw her task as being leading the enquirers and facilitating a process through which teachers could make a meaningful difference to the wider issues extant in the network's schools. She recognised that the establishment of clear structures and protocols were essential to underpin any learning and then allow it to travel and to make a difference. Included in this was the need to manage the power relationship inherent in having head teachers and teachers working together.

> "We began the journey by deciding that the focus for our work should be barriers to learning.  A questionnaire sent to schools, built on the issues identified by all the Heads, asked for volunteers to join enquiry groups on specific subjects.  Teachers "signed up" in isolation and came together as a group on our first enquiry day.  Because we wanted them to govern their own enquiry the Head teachers took a very "hands off" approach.  Enquiry groups spent some time trying to find their path and the way they wanted to work.  Success came as some groups gelled but others found it difficult.  Initially groups felt pressured to provide something, to be direct, to change to world.  It took time to get them comfortable with posing more questions than finding answers.  Our record of their work clearly shows the differences between groups."

Jack explains that in Hull,

> "Our leadership development follows a coaching model. The skills that have been learned are being used on a daily basis. Network leaders have to think not only about the quality of the programme but also the context that the learning takes place in. Learners need the opportunity to enact their learning in a meaningful way."

From this it emerges that network leaders need to consider not just the learning and the way that is experienced by colleagues but also the context of the learner.  Enabling the use of new skills and the application of new knowledge requires that network leaders are able to construct with their wider partners an appropriately relevant and powerful focus for the learning. Bransholme had a head start.

> "Our network grew out of our EAZ activity. We had originally developed three strands for our work that were all based around learning and leadership. The Networked Learning Community enabled us to refine this work and take it further."

Even given this advantage the issues of network leadership and high leverage soon raised their heads.

> "The distinctive things that we decided to tackle were around the areas where we thought we would be able to get some leverage. We wanted to do so many things that would have made a difference but simply didn't have the time, space and resource. We explored aspects of things we wanted to achieve and then decided to focus on those elements that best fit our context and the results we wanted to get within the resources we had."

*"Some of the decisions are financially based. We can't always do exactly what we want and we have to make choices. Co-leadership helps to synthesise the choices that need to be made."*

## 5. EVALUATION AND ALIGNMENT – THE NETWORK LEADER'S ROLE

Both networks have sought to build meaningful links between their network activity and other areas of work. Where co-leaders attribute greatest success is in those places where network learning aligns to school-based priorities. In both networks this is achieved through some form of self evaluation. Jack suggests that the network sees the importance of developing a

*"...system of reviewing impact in schools on a regular basis and making sure that things that work are spread and those that aren't whither and die."*

From this derives the most significant challenge of network leadership. If alignment is so crucial network leaders must be sensitive to the needs of all its constituent schools or design robust protocols that enable networks to surface these priorities and adapt to them. This is challenging and the extent of that challenge possibly accounts for the widely reported phenomenon of co-leaders' schools being the principal beneficiaries of networked learning. It may be that these schools are most closely aligned to the activities of the network Jack illustrates his awareness of this tendency.

*"We consciously make use of the trust that predates the network....Bringing people on board… Making the network more than the co-leaders... We want to distribute the leadership of the network and that means building skills and dealing with issues of power and influence."*

Co leaders of Networked Learning Communities across the programme are increasingly focused on the ways that their activity makes a difference to the educational experience of pupils. In Hartlepool and Hull it appears that the impact of the work is well grounded in evidence. Jean argues that,

*"Two years on we're still learning, we're still enthusiastic and we can see the benefits of this way of working. Where's the evidence you might ask. Some of it is self evident, 54 teachers from 14 schools formed 15 enquiry groups looking a Barriers to Learning must be positive."*

While both network leaders highlight that data in national testing regimes indicates improvement neither is prepared to declare any causality in this respect. Jack reflects that,

*"Our network is one of volunteers. On the face of it we're a fairly high capacity bunch and its may be this characteristic as much as any other that has been the lever for the improvement."*

Jack and Jean are likewise clear that the network cannot be evaluated by its impact on pupil test scores alone.

Church *et al.* (2003) highlight the importance of building an evaluation strategy in the design of new networks from the outset. From the work in the wider Networked Learning Community programme, and particularly the thinking of Chris Cotton, a simple rubric for evaluating the learning is emerging.

This rubric covers four basic aspects of learning in networks, helping leaders to both locate and evaluate high leverage areas and alignment of network activity.

## 6. PERSONAL LEARNING

*Does engagement with the work of a Networked Learning Community lead to personal development on the part of the learners? Are situations and environments being created that allow them to think differently about their work?*

Co leaders suggest that an area of powerful learning for themselves has been around leadership. Jean says,

> *"I firmly believe my leadership skills have been developed and enhanced and through the NLC and Consultant Leader training I've been enabled to reach out from my school and support other colleagues in difficult conditions at the request of the LEA. It's work I've really enjoyed and I know it's been much appreciated."*

This learning arises from the application of leadership beyond school, where the reach of hierarchical power may not be as pervasive and also from the enactment of leadership behaviours with another leader who may bring different skills to the work. Jack suggests that he learned about himself as a leader through the

> *"...ongoing lessons arising from our work and the need to tweak things in the light of this experience. It helps my work in my school through looking at the world in a different way. Using patterns of behaviour that work."*

Personal learning is evident in the work of others in the networks. In Jean's school, those who had had involvement in the enquiry programme described professional learning and pedagogical learning;

> *"I've grown professionally through working with people outside of school"*

> *"It's allowed me to incorporate ideas and new resources into my teaching"*

> *"Being part of an enquiry group makes you listen to the children more and makes your teaching focussed"*

> *"I feel valued professionally because I've been given school time to engage in professional dialogue with other teachers"*

## 7. COLLABORATION

*Are network leaders establishing processes that allow colleagues to learn the unique contribution that collaboration makes to learning? Are they modelling this and enacting their values through all aspects of their work?*

The challenges of co-leading initiatives promoted a wealth of learning about collaborative action and about the methodology of collaborative leadership. Both Jean and Jack found themselves discovering that they needed to evolve ways of working that promote this form of learning. Most of the learning arose through deep reflection on previous error. Jean reflects that

> *"We needed a tighter remit and guidance on how to be a group. Assumptions on what it meant to be a cross school group were unchallenged and unarticulated. As a group we realised this too late."*

Jack and his colleagues arrived at the conclusion that,

> *"It has to be about co-construction. Building concepts and understanding together. We have to model through our decision making a way of working that is collaborative."*

The learning has travelled into other areas of work as Jean explains,

*"In my school I see the influence of the NLC in everything we do and in the way we do it. In January my three SMT led three school improvement cross key-stage groups to address important issues for school. They met to consider the impact of high mobility on learning in school, another group looked at our schools self evaluation procedures and a third group considered teaching and learning strategies to maximise progress and development."*

## 8. NETWORKS

*Are networks leaders moving towards a fuller understanding of the distinctiveness of network forms and how network solutions can be engineered, sustained and evaluated?*

Co Leaders in Hull and Hartlepool are less precise in their articulation of the way their learning about networks and networking has evolved. However, Jack and Jean carry an implicit understanding of the key elements of network effectiveness. They routinely allude to their key leadership role, the need to create enticing and powerful forums for adult learning and the unrelenting focus on pupil learning. Jean particularly demonstrates how this understanding can travel to make a profound difference in her own school.

*"I established in-school enquiry groups. The groups were self governing and self determining and spent eight weeks ...enquiring into the issues and then brought their findings back to the whole staff. Their work was outstanding and has resulted in positive changes within school. I know that the six staff involved in NLC enquiry groups helped those groups function really effectively. All the staff enjoyed and felt empowered by the experience and I believe we covered a year's work in eight weeks because we distributed the leadership, ownership and the power. I was not part of any group, at my SMT insistence, and felt totally "out of the loop" but was comfortable to leave it to them. I don't believe I would have been so comfortable had it not been for the impact of the NLC on my management style."*

Her colleagues in school vouch fore the success of this approach in developing their own work.

*"I've had time to share and learn new ideas from other people. I've learned a lot from working with a colleague and visiting a Special School."*

*"It's been inspirational and allowed us to share good practice with other colleagues and other schools"*

*"We've learning how to network and built our capacity to do this in school."*

Jack points to the development of his understanding of how structures, systems and cultures within networks need to be explicit, aligned and well understood,

*"Our structures are tight. Things happen in our network. We have a culture about sharing and a philosophy based on giving things away. This is a shared philosophy that spreads into practice. We're committed to bottom up practice. Spreading from primary into secondary. Common practices that work and spread. We try to ensure that staff and pupils understand the practices and recognise their usefulness."*

Within this "tightness" there is an awareness of the need for an appreciation of diversity,

*"Schools in our network have success in different things and there is a need to share these. We're wanting to build on our understanding of one another so we can make good use of public knowledge and external expertise to improve learning."*

## 9. FACILITATION

*Are colleagues developing experience and expertise in facilitation in the learning process? Are co leaders providing the tools that will other colleagues facilitative repertoire? Are they building in time to reflect on the processes of learning and how these processes by be put to use in different contexts?*

This is possibly the most challenging aspect of co-leader learning. Jean uses her learning from involvement in the CLL programme to good effect as she seeks to learn from the ongoing developments of the network.

> *"So what would we do differently? We feel the groups needed coaching in the protocols and the remit for their work to give them a frame to work within. We should have allowed the Head teachers attached to each group to be more proactive and supportive at the beginning. We should have encouraged groups to have a nominated convenor/contact person from the beginning whilst ensuring the direction was allowed to evolve to reflect the views of the whole group.*
>
> *Our second tranche of enquiry groups began life very differently. They came to a specific event with the first tranche because they'd heard about the groups in their schools and were keen to be involved. Activities were designed, using NCSL material, which would result in self selected groups with an identified focus for their work. These enquiry groups also show flourish and floundering traits."*

In essence both co-leaders see that building the internal capacity of a network of schools to be central in the sustainability of network forms in their work. They see it as a necessary factor if the legacy of each of their networks is to be significant and lead to other collaborative, cross school solutions emerging in future.

The Hartlepool and Bransholme Networked Learning Communities continue to experience success and gain commitment from those involved in their learning journey. The leadership of the networks have learned powerfully about the challenges of network establishment. Their reflections on the structures and processes that they have created and used are diverse. They appear to lend credence to the argument that there is "no blueprint for effective networking" (Johns-Shepherd 2004). However, there does emerge an agreement that a leader's clear tasks are to maintain a focus on the learning of pupils and adults and that this can be achieved by being mindful of attempts to align network priorities to the real and intractable issues existing within schools and engaging with enticing learning processes that motivate and excite. This learning is likely to be important and networked based innovation stands at a cross roads and takes its first tentative steps to entering the mainstream policy agenda. The question remains to what extent can Jean and Jack and their fellow co-leaders pick up their learning and use it to enable others to create powerful solutions under the Primary National Strategy Learning Networks policy and Foundation Partnerships? (for further detail of this policy see http://www.standards.dfes.gov.uk/primary/features/primary/1095035/)