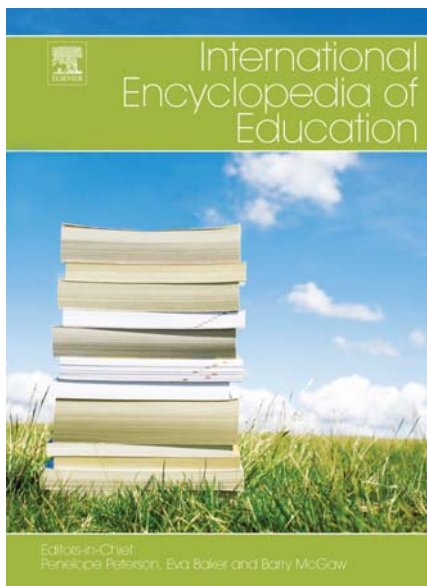


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Networked Learning Communities School-to-School Collaboration as an Essential Component of a System Reform Strategy*

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Glossary

Education action zones (EAZs) – A government program aimed at raising pupils' standards of achievement in areas of social and economic disadvantage by providing additional support to groups of schools and other partners to work collaboratively. The program focused on achievement in key curriculum areas: literacy, numeracy, information and communications technology, personal and social development, and professional development.

Excellence in cities (Eic) – A support program delivered locally by schools working in partnership with their local authority. It targeted deprived areas of the country seeking to transform urban secondary education by developing strategies and resources focused on teaching and learning, behavior and attendance, and leadership.

Innovation unit (IU) – The unit in England established by the government to foster practitioner-led innovation. Its role is to stimulate, incubate, and accelerate innovative practices on behalf of wider system learning and policy learning. Now in its second phase of development, most of IU's programs use the disciplines of the next-practice methodology that it has developed.

National College for School Leadership (NCSL) – The world's first national agency established in 2001, for the purpose of developing and supporting all aspects of school leadership. It seeks to grow and support current and future school leaders so that they can have a positive impact both within and beyond their schools.

Networked learning community (NLC) – A group of schools committed to interdependent working and learning on behalf of all the children they served, within the program. For the duration of the NLC program they became a new unit of educational meaning, a larger organizational form, and broader educational community. They also committed to making their learning and practice more widely

available, not just to the other schools in their NLC, but also to the wider system.

The 20th century was the century during which we built large institutions to do things for people. The 21st century is the century in which we help people to do things with and for one another

(Stephen Heppell).

Some Things We Know

There is a delightful saying in the organizational learning literature, attributed to Peter Senge, in which he notes that there are some organizations that remain steadfastly unable to learn what everyone in the organization knows.

Systems are like that, too. Some things we all seem to know, but the systems we work in are impervious to that collective knowledge. For example, it is widely accepted that the historical model of public-service change – centrally designed and delivered technorational strategies – will no longer work. The historical architecture of delivery, control, and accountability has had its time. We need a new way.

The English education system contains almost 24 000 individual school units, all relatively autonomous (one to another), yet accountable to central expectations through a national curriculum, national improvement strategies, key stage testing, centrally set target-and-inspection regimes. Local market accountabilities, through league tables and parental choice, follow on from these. Together, during the 1990s, these forces combined to foster system as a marketplace and to render schools more competitive than collaborative. Institutional success became a survival requirement, a stronger imperative than collective success.

Across the English-speaking world, the dominant school-improvement models utilize similar characteristics: schools designed on factory production principles; the profession layered and structured; the system tiered – a hierarchy of school, local authority (or school district), state, and national agency. Policy is mandated, practices are prescribed, and outcome targets specified. The logical route to improvement appears to be to strengthen delivery mechanisms and tighten accountabilities through targets, inspection, financial incentives, and consumer choice.

Such top-down-, outside-in-change approaches are seductive, because they appear to work well in the

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short-term – the system mobilizes itself around the targets, teachers teach to the tests – but then, as we have seen with England's national strategies, improvements stall. Even more important, although this reform model raises general levels of attainment in the short term, it fails to close the gap in educational achievement between the most and least advantaged.

The paradigm is wrong for the times. Contemporary change needs are too rapid, knowledge is too ubiquitous, contexts of knowledge application are too diverse – and centrally coordinated strategies are unlikely either to be responsive enough, or to be sensitive to the unique challenges of these diverse circumstances. Such strategies do not stimulate or harness practitioner innovation and ownership. Worse, over time, they denude the system of its energy and creativity – its own innovative capacity.

In a sentence, not only are overcentralized reform strategies intrinsically unsustainable, they are also, over time, capacity denuding.

Much We Do Not Yet Know

There is an increasingly widespread view that a more collaborative, adaptive, and long-term problem-solving approach to educational change is the way to go. Sustainable improvement requires a shift to a different model: one which emphasizes capacity building; which spreads and uses leadership widely; which enables and encourages rapid knowledge transfer; which fosters and utilizes practitioner innovation and creativity; and which values system learning and builds for sustainability. The problem is, we just do not yet have the tools and know-how to orchestrate such a pervasive change.

Part of the resistance is that England's policymakers are heavily influenced by history of reform – particularly the more permissive 1960s and 1970s – which would seem to tell us that random, unstructured, and unconnected innovation does not serve the system well either. Past experience (it says) suggests that unfettered innovation is unlikely to achieve the common purpose and connectivity required to bring coherence and alignment to system-improvement efforts.

Despite these reservations, there is a history in the UK, from different governments, of policies designed to stimulate collaboration, from technical and vocational education initiative (TVEI) more than 20 years ago, through education action zones (EAZs) and excellence in cities (EiCs), to more recent examples. Most have been heavily prescribed from the center, mandated, overly incentivized or resource dependent, and targeted at the most intractable problem areas – inner cities and schools perceived to be failing. They have tended not to be models designed to be either sustained or scaled. At best, the jury is out as to what we learn from these collaborative policy models,

but any sense that there was, as we entered the twenty-first century, a cumulative body of knowledge from them would be fanciful (Demos, 2000). The history of reform in this area has not encouraged the accumulation of a body of learning – what evaluations exist tend to be focused on outcomes rather than learning.

So, on the ground we do not yet have the practice knowledge or the ways of spreading it if we did. At the center, the system is not well served by its own research history from previous initiatives, nor, if we are honest, informed by best available public knowledge, particularly that from other sectors, where collaborative norms are more fully developed. Most tellingly, even if there were clearer understandings about the characteristics of disciplined collaboration, the current architecture of reform gets in the way. You cannot mandate collaborative practices through delivery and accountability levers.

The opposite question: “What is the role of policy and the machinery of state in promoting and supporting emergent, adaptive, locally owned collaborative arrangements?” is the theme addressed in this article.

This was the situation we faced in 2000. Both logic and evidence from practice were indicating that purposeful collaboration between schools could be more conducive to organizational learning than competition. We wanted to know what effective collaboration looked like, and also how it could be incentivized, mobilized and supported – the conditions that would optimize success.

Our belief was that networks of schools engaged in orchestrated and disciplined networked learning offered an alternative way of providing connection and alignment around the multiple concerns facing education. In fact, we argued that networked learning offered a highly effective method of adaptation and integration. We were confident that it would improve outcomes for young people.

These grounded beliefs lay at the heart of what England's National College for School Leadership (NCSL) set out to achieve in the networked learning communities (NLCs) program (Jackson, 2003, 2005), a system-wide development and enquiry program.

The Networked Learning Communities Program

The NLC program was a system-wide development and research initiative involving 137 networks (1500 schools) that took place between 2002 and 2006. It was specifically designed to inform system learning and national policy, as well as to provide practice evidence about network design and implementation issues, network size and type, facilitation and leadership, formation processes and growth states, brokerage, and system support and incentivization. It sought to generate evidence about how and under what conditions networks can make a contribution to raising

student achievement and attainment, about the leadership practices that prove to hold most potential for collaborative learning and about the new relationships emerging between networks as a unit of engagement and their local authority and community partners.

There were six strands to the basic framework of the NLC design and, unlike traditional delivery approaches, it was designed from the inside out. The six levels of learning were:

- pupil learning (a classroom-learning focus);
- adult learning (professional learning communities);
- leadership learning (shared and distributed leadership opportunities);
- organizational learning (new organizational norms);
- school-to-school learning (networked learning); and
- network-to-network learning (lateral-system learning).

Each network additionally elected to engage other appropriate partners, usually one or more from a higher education institution (HEI) or local authority (LA) or community partner. There were also four further non-negotiables:

- moral purpose – a commitment to success for all children (If you do not care almost as much about the success of children in other schools as you do about those in your own, this would not be the program for you.);
- shared leadership (e.g., co-leadership);
- enquiry-based practice (evidence and data-driven learning); and
- adherence to a model of learning.

This model of learning provided a program-wide discipline and analytical template for what we called networked learning (Figure 1).

The use of this model of learning in support of collaborative joint work practices (networked learning) proved to be a very powerful discipline for networks of schools in the program. Participants across schools agreed a shared

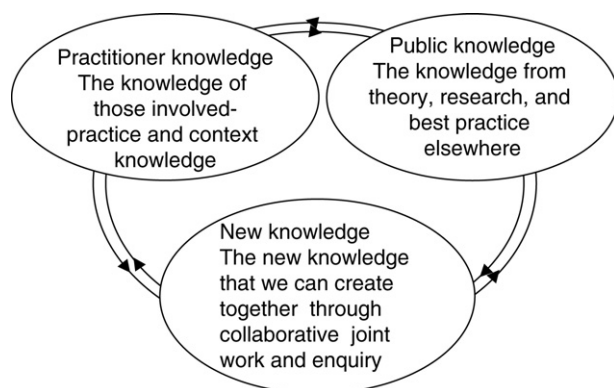


Figure 1 Three fields of knowledge.

purpose and content focus for their learning – something more aspirational than they could achieve alone.

Networked learning takes place when individuals from different schools in a network come together in groups to engage in rigorous and challenging joint work activity informed by the public knowledge base, using their own know-how and co-constructing knowledge together, as described in the three-fields learning model. In doing so, they are involved in four distinct learning processes:

1. Learning from one another (exchange): where groups capitalize on their individual differences and diversity through sharing their knowledge, experience, expertise, practices, and know-how.
2. Learning with one another (joint work): where individuals learn together, notice that they are learning together, co-construct learning, and make meaning together. Collaborative practitioner enquiry and collaborative learning about recent research are good examples of this activity.
3. Learning on behalf of: where learning between individuals from different schools is undertaken on behalf of other individuals within their school and network – or the wider system.
4. Meta-learning: where individuals are additionally learning about the processes of their own learning and the way that the system learns in ways that build sustainable capacity.

Such collaborative learning in networks has been shown to expand professional identity, from the school as a unit of community to the locality (the wider network) as a unit of educational community. Contextual relevance focuses activity on local change. Changes in teachers' knowledge and understanding and changes in school-level behavior and classroom practice are intermediate outcomes. The ultimate purpose of networked learning is to improve student learning, achievement, and attainment. Wider benefits also include improved confidence and self-esteem among participants, enhanced motivation, a richer sense of professional efficacy, broader professional identity (and liberation from context), and a capacity routinely to engage in wider professional partnerships.

These features begin to answer inevitable questions about cost benefit. There is no doubt that the early phases of collaborative activity are hard and typically not cost effective. The new kinesthetics of collaboration run against the grain of historical practices and we have to learn how to do it well. However, if viewed not as a short-term test of efficacy, but as a necessary phase of the learning process, the value is cumulative.

When practitioners within a network come together, it takes an effort of will and discretionary effort. They need no persuading that the engagement has to be made worthwhile in terms of changed practices and learning gains. Strikingly, the final evaluation of the program found a

direct correlation between levels of involvement and pupil achievement gains – the more staff involved in the network, the more gains for students.

Alternative Approaches to Incentivization and Implementation

Launched as a design framework at a series of regional continuing professional development (CPD) conferences in the autumn of 2001, the groundswell of support for the NLC program took those of us leading the program by surprise. It captured a moment. The profession was clearly weary of a climate of competition, outside-in change programs, normative improvement agendas, and externally generated accountability systems. There was a feeling that we needed to create space in the system for local creativity, lateral learning, and accountability, distributed leadership and the sharing of practice. Having achieved short-term improvements through the externally generated reform agenda, the next phase would take on different and less-predictable shapes. It would occupy different directions of travel, too, being less outside-in than inside-out; less top-down than lateral in direction; and less one (the center) to many than many (the network) to many (other networks).

Informing this, an explicit set of beliefs invited participation (NCSL, 2003). The logic sequence proved persuasive. The first was that normative notions of intelligence are out of date – that all children can be intelligent and powerful learners if schools can learn how to enable it. It is not any longer children that fail in the system so much as the system that fails young people. Sufficient is now known that every child can be a powerful learner. Second, schools, teachers, and leaders who aspire to continuous learning look beyond their own school – recycling existing internal knowledge is a poor foundation for growth. Collaboration (teachers and schools working together rather than competing negatively) is the route to learning and is professionally motivating. Third, the knowledge and the will exist but coherent models, a facilitative policy environment, and a commitment to learning at all levels of the system are required to make it happen. Finally, there is no profession with greater leadership potential than teaching to achieve these things.

The program therefore asked schools to form interdependent networks, to work with and for one another for the benefit of all children, the schools, and the communities they serve. It was formulated as a design intervention, and the design was theoretically and practically informed. The development team utilized both the literature base and practice base, visiting 14 locations around the world to build from best available knowledge. The prototype model (and the challenges of its implementation) was then further co-developed through a sequence of seminars

with practitioners, experts, potential participants, and consultants from both education and beyond.

In the end, what that design meant in practical terms on the ground was to be locally determined – not as an indulgence, but because we believed that they would know best. Networks were supported to co-construct their own responses: their local architecture, the focus of their collaboration, and the enquiry engagement relevant for their context. The aim was to develop involvement, engagement, and spread of leadership, not to prescribe structures.

In support of this, there were some uncharacteristic dimensions to the implementation components of the program. Documentation was minimal and intended to support local efforts rather than to meet central requirements. There was funding for the program, but networks had to match it in kind – showing that they were putting effort and resource into new ways of working and network-dedicated activity. We asked for finance templates (expected network spend), but the only audit was to declare variances – we were interested in how emergent learning shifted spending decisions and why. There was to be no external review for 2 years; instead, networks were expected to formulate their learning into artifacts such that knowledge could be shared with other networks. What review existed was self- and peer review. Networks were encouraged to visit one. Talking about what did not work was valued as highly as what did.

Another feature was that networks could not have one leader – co-leadership was the experimental model for the first year, and one which none of the 137 networks moved away from in subsequent years. These co-leaders operated as system leaders within the network.

Even the process of writing submissions was unusual and emphasized learning values. Regional submission-writing seminars were held during which representatives from potential networks helped one another to design proposals through peer critique and the exchange of ideas. (What is the best idea that you have had today? We would like you to give it away to everyone else in the room.) Formative feedback was given on written proposals – redrafting based on feedback encouraged. The final assessment phase (given that we received 150 proposals – more than 10 times what was expected) involved presentation to peer-review teams, the thinking being that ideas would be shared and disciplines learned from the assessment process.

Throughout the program, the central team operated as a surrogate intermediate system, but with an emphasis on their role as knowledge brokers. The networked learning group was tasked with three core goals:

1. the development of good networks;
2. learning about networked learning; and
3. enabling learning to inform the wider system.

As such, direct support for networks and the facilitation and brokerage of lateral learning and exchange were

significant early tasks. Increasingly, the synthesis of program knowledge and the design of tools, protocols, and publications to support both program and wider system learning were an increasing part of the work.

What Did We Learn?

Three sections from the 3-year external evaluation of the NLC program are illuminating to frame this section. The first, the one that matters most to most people, states that networks made a difference for young people. They worked in raising standards of achievement:

There is a connection between the participation in a network and improvement in pupil attainment. The study provides evidence that when networks of schools work together, there is an impact on pupil learning. The number of people in the school who are active in the network was positively correlated with pupil outcomes. . . .and the level of network attachment was related to change in pupil outcomes. . . .Network attachment was also correlated with intermediate outcomes of changes in thinking and practice in schools

(Earl *et al.*, 2006).

The second explicitly links collaborative and joint work with learning and change:

An important and necessary finding in this study was the emergence of a new factor for both schools and networks that we have called “rigorous and challenging joint work”. It is high order collaboration. It requires participants to suspend judgement, challenge their assumptions and intentionally seek out new information in the quest for ideas and practices that work. Rigorous and challenging joint work may be at the heart of the power of networks. Networks can provide the forum for colleagues to address genuinely new, and often difficult, ideas in a safe environment, away from the risk of censure or even retribution in their daily place of work

(Earl *et al.*, 2006).

The third links learning and leadership – both distributed and formal:

Trust relationships and mutual challenge are the things that make the links in networks; tapping explicit (public) knowledge and exposing tacit (private) knowledge provide the process; and leadership, both formal and distributed, can create the forums and provide the necessary support and capacity building opportunities to move the process forward

(Earl *et al.*, 2006).

If this is an overview of external evaluation findings, our work at NCSL also helped us to pick out a more finely grained set of learning points along the way. The first is a

set of verities. As stated earlier, the NLC program drew from best available knowledge worldwide. In accumulating that body of evidence, certain themes recurred which were subsequently further validated through the program's work.

These verities are, chiefly, that collaboration relies on voluntarism and having a compelling reason to work together – one that accords with the strong moral purpose of the teaching profession. Networks also require good internal leadership. As for all organizational forms, leadership is critical, but it manifests itself differently when influence and facilitative support (rather than positional authority and hierarchical status) are key characteristics. In addition, networks benefit from external brokerage and critical friendship. Given these conditions, networks expand access to good ideas and enable greater sharing of professional knowledge.

Our ongoing process of learning and research throughout the program helped us to understand the challenges, the dynamics and the rewards of collaboration more deeply. Research (internal and external to the program), evaluation activities, network reviews, program-wide enquiries, sustained facilitator engagement, and the involvement of a number of respected international associates together yielded a huge body of evidence. This in turn has allowed us to expand the boundaries of what is known about successful collaboration.

A full account exists elsewhere (Jackson, 2005). In summary, we learned that new ways of working together emerge with difficulty and at high early transaction cost; that trust is an important issue for networks, but it is more an outcome of rigorous joint work than it is a precondition; that some of the motivational energy for participants stems from the acquisition of a sense of expanded professional identity; and that networked learning surfaces the reciprocity and generosity which is at the heart of a professionally collaborative culture.

Moreover, and importantly, networks spread leadership influence. They act both to distribute leadership and also liberate new types of leaders. These leaders understand their connection to the wider profession – learning on behalf of (mentioned above) was a major motivator for knowledge exchange and joint work activities. As such transfer of practice is far too naive a concept to describe the knowledge-exchange processes in networks. Collective problem solving, joint work projects, collaborative enquiry – in short, a range of innovation and knowledge-creation activities – better describe the learning processes. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this expanded leadership capacity accentuated rather than diminished the significance of formal leaders (school headteachers), whose capacity to enable and empower the participation of others, to gatekeep network outcomes within their own school – and to model commitment to networked learning – was directly correlated to success. The eternal

evaluation finding that gains for students in schools positively correlated with formal leader engagement with the network was no surprise.

Where successful, NLCs created new units of meaning, locality provision for young people – and new units of engagement for local authorities and other external partners.

Beyond this, there are some more tentative propositions that emerged from the NLC work and which bear the warranty of experience more than research.

Perhaps most importantly, we came across the well-established problem of causality – how can networks prove that they are making a difference greater than the sum of their parts and, when they do, how can they take the credit for it? We were able to show that pupils in the 1500 NLC schools made statistically significant attainment gains greater than those in schools not in NLCs, but proving causality is another matter!

We knew that voluntarism was vital, but we now believe it can be orchestrated with the help of intermediaries. Since the start of the program, some local authorities have implemented learning networks across all their schools, co-designing local solutions with groups of schools. Good system-brokerage skills are a vital part of this work and local authorities as system designers might be one of the differentiating skill sets for the future.

Successfully orchestrating participation also relies on a structural architecture built around shared challenges and goals for learning, and in which people are prepared to experiment with new communication channels that break the traditional, hierarchical mould. Logic tells us that ICT should play a vital role in that process, and yet there are very few examples of it being integral to the success of networks. As that suggests, networked learning is most likely to work when participants unlearn some of their old practices and embrace new ways of working. Those in positional roles enshrining institutional power have the most challenging unlearning agendas.

Finally, variability of commitment is another inherent and perhaps inevitable challenge for learning networks. It is, of course, for all organizations, but it is more visible in networks. Accommodating those variances while still retaining collective buy-in and commitment to core purposes is a key leadership skill for network leaders.

What Did We Learn about Implementing and Facilitating Networks?

The team that supported the NLC program – NCSL's networked learning group – was itself trying to explore what role intermediary bodies could play in catalyzing and supporting networks on the ground. Its performance was a potential model for organizations like local authorities in developing collaborative work.

There is no doubt that we did some things well. The program was both theoretically and practically informed (McCormick, 2004). We succeeded in generating a compelling design, underpinned by values, which motivated engagement. The co-design orientation, and subsequent co-development work, stimulated new relationships between system partners. We did not have the answers, so these were learning relationships. The model of learning was a seriously important shared discipline. The development team brokered lateral connections and stimulated peer-to-peer learning.

If improved outcomes for children are the critical determinant of success, then the external evaluation shows that this was achieved. If creating a body of knowledge is the yardstick, then it is fair to say that, as the program progressed, we wrestled – successfully on the whole – with the challenges of real-time learning now manifested in our tools and publications. The legacy of products and materials is quite probably of national and international significance.

We never, of course, pretended (or wanted to pretend) that we had the answers, or that everything was successful. This was a program committed to learning through doing, and we were open about our uncertainties and failures with the networks, just as we asked them to be open with one another. With the clarity of hindsight, we could have done a number of things more effectively.

In retrospect, the NLCs design came to be too close to a brand. In proposing NLC as an ideal prototype to support development, we unwittingly gave the impression that we were proposing this model as the single, or best way forward. Again, also with the wisdom of hindsight, our central infrastructure grew too large. Networked systems can be supported with a minimum of central capacity by utilizing leadership from the front line – and in so doing grounding decisions and thinking in the experience of practice. Our central infrastructure did not assist us to sustain the co-development orientation in the eyes of networks, either.

Two early decisions proved to be only partially wise. First, the networks received nominal funding for the first 3 of the 4 years. That may have been a mistake. We wanted to stimulate new capacities and ways of working and knew that some funding would help. So it did, but a proportion of networks saw the removal of funding as a barrier to sustainability. No funding could have been the way to go.

Second, we knew that baselining at the outset would be crucial to evaluating achievements. We wanted each network to take ownership of its own baselining strategy and we developed tools to scaffold that work. Looking back, that work was pretty variable, not least because the networks were at such a formative stage when asked to do it.

The last reflection links into the concluding points below. The network learning group was itself a part of a national agency, NCSL. In common with many innovators, we felt under siege early on, felt that we were challenging historical practices and were in turn being

challenged by those who were skeptical or threatened by the program. We could have integrated our work into the college more effectively – and as a result had less influence there than might have been possible.

That is an honest appraisal. The final section makes some equally honest concluding observations about barriers to taking collaborative practice to scale across entire public-service systems.

Conclusion

Systems can seem dumb. It is difficult for them to learn what is widely known, not least because the system's learning structures are themselves a part of the problem.

Enough is known. It is not primarily lack of knowledge that prevents collaborative working – either between schools or across services. The NLC program alone has created a huge store of evidence and learning and there are other rich sources of knowledge, both in this country and abroad. In a system configured for one-to-many rather than many-to-many dissemination, though, there are certainly problems making what knowledge we have widely available sufficiently quickly, at scale, to support emergent practices.

In addition, the issue of scale is also a part of the problem. In her internationally regarded study on scale Coburn (2003) identifies four dimensions in which we lack a resolute theory: depth, sustainability, spread, and shift in reform ownership. The third of these poses interesting challenges for the support of a collaborative system. About spread she says:

Rather than thinking of spread solely in terms of expanding outward to more and more schools and classrooms, this emphasis highlights the potential to spread reform-related norms within the district. At the district level, spread involves the ways in which reform norms and principles influence district policies, procedures, and professional development.

This is clearly a conundrum. We know from our own work that a network-based system requires brokerage and support. There is a crucial facilitation role for local authorities and a critical role in generating facilitative policy at a national level. To make the shift, both local and national agencies will have to internalize the challenging norms and principles of a more networked and collaborative system. But local and national government often appear irretrievably hierarchical and bureaucratic.

Returning for a moment to the epigraph at the start of this piece, Stephen Heppell referred to the organizations set up in the twentieth century to do things for people. As we seek to liberate collaborative arrangements, to help people to do things with and for one another, what could well stand in the way are those same organizations, hierarchically

structured, culturally siloed, relatively impermeable to learning, set up to provide answers, and to believe that they know best.

In addition to the external evaluation, as a part of the wider research program, we also commissioned a study on the role of local authorities in supporting school networks. Aubyn Howard in the report from this piece of work writes:

Networked learning is part of a system-wide shift towards a more collaborative and interconnected way of working – the system local authorities support is becoming more networked. Alongside this, LAs are also being asked to network internally to deliver Every Child Matters. However, many don't know either how to do this or how to reconfigure to support school-to-school networks – why would they? Moving into networked learning mode themselves (within services, between services or agencies and between LAs) such that they model practices and apply them in new forms of engagement with networks of schools, is a good way to start. This means embracing collaboration, networking and learning within the way they work. (They) need to engage in a deeper internal process of organisational and cultural change if their efforts to model networking and work differently in support of ECM are to be sustained

(Howard, 2006).

If this applies to local authorities, it is equally applicable to national agencies, to government, and to the structures of the civil service. The critical orientation for change is a learning orientation. This means engagement with front-line collaborative practices, not to provide answers, not to hold to account, or to bureaucratize, but to learn how better to accommodate risk, and to provide enablement and support. It is a role of system broker and shaper, and it is a very different orientation.

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