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**Working the interface: brokerage and learning networks**

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### **Abstract**

The establishment of school-based learning networks is one of the more significant recent changes in the way that professional learning and organisational change have been conceptualised. This article argues that network development requires facilitation and conceptualises this work as brokerage, a concept highlighting the tensions of working as an 'inside-outsider'. Using interviews, observations of meetings, document analysis and case studies, an understanding of the practices of a group of National College of School Leadership network facilitators employed to support network development was developed. Facilitators saw themselves as facilitating the learning of network members and fostering accountability. Positioned at the boundary of the network, connected to many other groups, the success of their attempts to access and establish a legitimate role in their networks varied from group to group. As such, some Facilitators experienced their work as disorienting. 'Communities of brokerage practice' served as buffer zones between networks and their employing organisation - a space to not only reflect upon and build an understanding of brokerage work but to evolve and develop the practice itself. Recommendations for organisations supporting a similar role are made.

## **Introduction**

In the United Kingdom (UK) education sector, the development of thinking about networks and networking has been described as one of the most significant recent changes in the way that professional learning and organisational change have been conceptualised and described (Carmichael, Fox et al. 2006). Premised upon the belief that student learning cannot be improved without improving teacher learning, school improvement networks bring practitioners together from different organisations to learn by sharing ideas, planning collaboratively and critiquing each other's ideas (O'Hair and Veugelers 2005). Schools work together in networks to pool resources, expertise and effort to achieve more together than can be done alone (Jopling and Spender 2006).

Practitioners in networked schools are brought together around a variety of learning activities or events to carry out collaborative enquiry (Day and Hadfield 2005; Bartlett and Burton 2006; Jackson 2006), cross school visitation and shared professional development opportunities (O'Hair and Veugelers 2005). Other networks have a role in critiquing and working to influence government policy (Veugelers and Zijlstra 2005). The network described by Day and Hadfield (2005) can be understood as a kind of external capacity for individual schools to draw from for their own improvement. The mutual activities of networks arise out of necessity - to solve a problem or issue of mutual concern that is too large for any one organisation to handle on its own (Wohlstetter, Malloy et al. 2003).

Configured around activities of this kind, the network has been presented as a means to retain teacher-driven professional development and autonomy in the wake of the United

Kingdom's standards driven change agenda, imposed initiatives, increased workload, intensification and teacher surveillance (Day and Hadfield 2005). Indeed, bottom-up school improvement initiatives developing local, context-specific practices are seen as a strategy to break through the glass ceiling of improvement associated with top-down initiatives (Jackson, 2006; O'Brien et al., 2006).

It is understandable then that networks have drawn the attention of policy makers. The UK Government, the National College of School Leadership, in consultation with the General Teaching Council and the Department of Education and Skills (DfES), are moving to leave behind the notion of the 'stand-alone' school, seen in isolation from its neighbouring schools (O'Brien, Burton et al. 2006). Hannon (2005; 2005) writing for the DfES describes a future UK networked landscape of schools working together in "structured and systematic ways" in clusters, collegiates, collaboratives and partnerships. She outlines a five year DfES strategy promoting networks of schools including the establishment of Primary National Strategy Learning Networks which constitute a major opportunity for primary schools to work together on shared activity focused on enhancing pupil learning outcomes.

The challenge in this emerging landscape of school networks is how to intentionally develop or support a network that harnesses the power of voluntary teacher-driven peer learning within the policy imperatives described by Hannon (2005) or through Local Education Authority support (National College of School Leadership 2005).

Unfortunately, while the establishment of networks is a clear priority in the UK school

sector, this area lacks a solid foundation in research. A clear theorisation of the network and its accompanying research base is still emergent (O'Brien, Burton et al. 2006). The area reflects considerable diversity of opinion on approaches to network types, models (Kerr, Aiston et al. 2003) and most significantly a paucity of material on best practice in network development and maintenance (Veugelers and O'Hair 2005). While much has been learnt over the years, the area remains under-informed.

This article seeks to contribute to the knowledge base on network development by describing the work and challenges faced by a group of network consultants or facilitators employed by the UK's National College of School Leadership to foster the development of school-to-school networks. It will argue that a useful theoretical background for network facilitation is the concept of brokerage before describing the nature of the Networked Learning Communities Programme and the Facilitator's role. The article continues with a description of the research methodology and outlines key processes in network facilitation. The paper concludes by outlining some implications for organisations engaged in supporting the work of networks.

### **Network facilitation and brokerage**

Facilitation focused on building participation and connection across organisations is often presented as a sine non qua of establishing and maintaining networks (Lieberman and Grolnick 1996; Church, Bitel et al. 2003; Kerr, Aiston et al. 2003; Wohlstetter, Malloy et al. 2003). The net needs to be worked. However, to understand "working the net", this activity needs to be placed in the particular character of the networked organisational

form. A review of the networks referred to by Veuglers and O'Hair (2005), on the American scene by Wohlstetter (2003) and Lieberman and Grolnick (1996) or in the UK's networked learning communities (Jackson 2006) demonstrate that while these networks may emerge out of informal contacts and friendships, these partnerships often require a formal structure of some kind. These networks often incorporate formal leadership and governance structures that set strategic direction, resource and provide space for the network so that the work can meet the needs of the schools involved (Allen and Hensley 2005; Thorpe and Kubiak 2005).

Even so, the power of these *networked* structures lies in their ability to foster informal *networking*. As Hadfield (2005) argues, the tendency to separate professional yet informal *networking* from formalised *networks* as an organisational structure should not obscure the interdependence of networking (social action and relationships) and networks (formal structures). Networks ultimately rest on the relational and the participative. Indeed, it has been argued that while teacher-to-teacher relationships may need brokerage to form, they must be entered into and sustained on a voluntary basis as a source of inspiration, productivity or solidarity (Fielding, Bragg et al. 2005).

Facilitation attends to this interplay between networking and the networked structure. Quinn (1988) identified the facilitator as a leadership role concerned with building participation and consensus within an organisation. This concept of facilitation connects with Lieberman and Grolnick's (1996) work in which they outline a number of functions of facilitation such as articulating and protecting the values of participants, securing

commitment by negotiating around intellectual, ideological and practical differences, organizing encounters between parties, facilitating information flow and ensuring the network is resourced.

The review of network coordinators carried out by Kerr et al. (2003) identified a much broader range roles that include and extend beyond Quinn's (1988) mentor, innovator and broker leadership roles in organisations. Network coordinators are concerned with knowing the network participants and connecting with other actors and resources in the field, creating connections, exploiting opportunities and working with participants' strengths and assets to build network capacity (Kerr, Aiston et al. 2003). Fielding et al. (2005) bring to the fore the issue of supporting learning in their work on the transfer of practice between collaborating schools. They identify a number of brokerage activities that resonate with the facilitation work described elsewhere:

- Knowing about and making information available (brokering practices);
- Putting people in touch (brokering relationships);
- Creating a sense of audience and a sense of community to provide a context for practice sharing (enabling fruitful dialogue);
- Providing resources that could make practice sharing happen (resourcing joint work);
- Being a catalyst for activity among network members.

The concept of brokerage has some value in theorising network facilitation. The community of practice work of Wenger (1998) and Burt's (Burt 2000; Burt 2004; Burt 2005) social capital perspective both emphasise the balancing act of brokerage. By



working between groups to build connections, transfer ideas or introduce new practices, the broker enjoys considerable advantages in their role. Burt (2005) argues that because brokers have networks spanning “structural holes” – the space between different groups – they are more likely to be regarded positively, receive positive performance evaluations, and most importantly, seen as holding “good ideas.” Brokers often have a control advantage. In the “swirling mix” of preferences characteristic of networks, no demands have absolute authority and the broker enjoys a disproportionate say in whose interests are served and as such can hold positions of considerable influence (Burt 2000). Brokers can appear gifted with creativity. However, such creativity is born not of genius but as an idea import-export business between groups (Burt 2004).

At the same time, brokerage can be a difficult role. Both Burt (2005) and Wenger (1998) argue that brokers are often seen as outsiders. This is not only because they work between groups rather than at their centre but also, because they are carrying information from elsewhere in the system, they often advocate ideas not held by others. Wenger’s (1998) writings stress the broker’s experience of uncertainty and ambivalence growing out of their insider–outsider relationship. From the community of practice perspective, brokers connect the practices of different communities by facilitating the translation, coordination and alignment of perspectives and meanings (Wenger 1998), but they remain liminal creatures in that they are both ‘in and out’ (Corbin, McNamara et al. 2003). Brokers dance a difficult line avoiding:

*“... two tendencies: being pulled in to become full members and being rejected as intruders. Indeed their contributions lie*

*precisely in being neither in nor out. Brokering therefore requires an ability to manage carefully the co-existence of membership and non-membership, yielding enough distance to bring a different perspective, but also enough legitimacy to be listened to”*

(Wenger, 1998, p 78)

Managing the co-existence of membership and non-membership means that brokers can face legitimacy challenges. Brokers perceived as “one of us” are more likely to have the trust of particular groups (Burt 2005). Those brokers perceived as “outsiders” may find that their attempts to broker across holes may be interpreted as clumsy, rude and ultimately unproductive (Burt 2000). Wenger (1998) suggests that brokers must be connected enough to the community of practice to have the legitimacy to be listened to but at the same time have enough distance to offer a different perspective which provides value to the community of practice.

Corbin et al. (2003) argue that the multi-membership of brokers places them at the cusp of different practices and possibilities for identities, including both productive and conflictual engagements. After all, groups often differ in terms of tempo, focus, reward, power and language. This can make translating and coordinating perspectives between groups a challenging task. Also, introduced practices may be resisted marginalising the broker or in contrast, successful introduction can marginalise old timers associated with the old order. In the case of brokers given a formal role to cascade new practices into networks, their success can not be taken for granted. In learning networks which stress

collaborative or inclusive work, the successful broker needs a light touch balancing their positional advantage as potential influential and seemingly creative possessor of good ideas (Burt 2000) with the need to encourage independence and collective involvement.

Brokers then need the ability to influence others and a political astuteness to work on the boundaries of organisations (Quinn 1988). Indeed, Wenger (1998) argues that certain individuals seem to thrive on creating connections and engaging in import-export preferring to dwell on the boundaries of many practices rather than move to the core of any one. Moreover, although many brokers enjoy this role as ‘maverick outsider’, their position between two worlds and potential legitimacy problems make a sense of uprootedness and disorientation an occupational hazard. Wenger (1998) suggests that it is useful for brokers to have their own communities of brokerage practice made up of other brokers in order to recognize that their difficulties are not personal inadequacies but are part and parcel of the role. Such communities of practice enable brokers to collectively develop practices of brokerage.

Overall though, in both Wenger’s and Burt’s analysis, little is known about the mechanism of brokerage. While Burt’s work does represent a growing understanding of its functions in the private sector, there is a need for more data in the area of school improvement networks. Literature from the private sector may be illuminative but it tends to rest upon assumptions of organisational and leadership structures that do not match the school sector or its particular values and goals. Given that brokerage is an

important part of facilitating network development, the field would benefit from more research into the role and experience of network brokers.

### **Context for the research**

I now turn to an examination of brokerage in a particular school-to-school network program. In 2002 England's National College of School Leadership (NCSL) launched the Networked Learning Group (NLG) to fund the establishment of, support and research Networked Learning Communities (NLC). A NLC is a cluster of schools working in interdependent partnerships that may also involve at least one higher education institution (HEI), local education authority (LEA) and/or community group partner. Over 104 NLCs (over a thousand schools) across England were set up to support school improvement through various forms of networked CPD, leadership development and collaborative enquiry focused on developing local, context-specific practices and solutions.

Recognising the need to support network development and to learn from their efforts, the NLG employed a team of network consultants called Facilitators. Many came from a background in educational leadership in schools. These Facilitators worked to develop network members' capacity to work their net through coaching and by making connections between groups to enable networks to learn from each other. The Facilitator role also included serving as critical friends, holding the network to account against its own aspirations and the values of the programme. They were also responsible for

capturing and passing on emerging knowledge from the networks so as to deepen the learning of network participants as well as the programme and policy makers as a whole.

When the programme was first established, the literature on school improvement networks, their development and facilitation was relatively limited. As the practices, parameters and protocols of facilitation were not well-established when the first cohort of networks were launched, the NLG decided to conduct research into the work of network facilitation or in the terms used in this article, network brokerage. This research, which was carried out over the period of a year by three researchers employed by the programme was intended to feed into the evolving practice of the organisation. While there were a number of other research projects investigating network leadership, growth states or knowledge transfer, it was felt that learning about the work of NLG facilitators would not only provide intelligence to improve the support offered to networks but would also be useful to other programmes developing networks. In addition, it was felt that a study into facilitation would illuminate the nature of networks themselves.

### **Methodology**

In the early stages of the programme, semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted with 16 out of the 18 NLG Facilitators focusing on their role and practice. These interviews were audio-taped and transcribed to assist with recall and validation of the Facilitator's comments and reflections. The data collected from interviews were analysed using content analysis methods. Three main themes were identified – the work done with networks, the challenges of accessing networks and the need to establish

organisational supports or practice “anchors” for Facilitators. An initial research report summarizing these themes was presented to Facilitators and discussions elicited a range of comments which helped develop conceptualisations of these areas.

Three researchers also carried out three months of participant observation with the three newly formed regional groups of Facilitators. In these monthly meetings Facilitators discussed the activities, philosophies and challenges of facilitation. They also planned and discussed the challenges of implementing cross-programme strategy. These meetings provided important data. They were not simply concerned with reflecting upon practice or debriefing after network visits. The meetings were facilitation practice itself as they involved planning group facilitation activities, solving problems and developing tools for their work. In short, these meetings can be understood as the formation and functioning of a community of brokerage practice. The researchers endeavored to not only capture the essence of the discussions in their notes but also, to record verbatim quotes of key statements. Their notes from these meetings were written up and circulated to facilitation team members for comment and validation.

At the same time, three case studies of Facilitator work with a network were carried out. The networks were selected because they represented the spread of geography of networks in the programme (one each from the North, South and Midlands). Also, the programme was supporting well-established networks as well as those that had formed more recently. So, the case studied networks were also selected because of their different phases of development. One had been recently formed while the other two had longer

histories and were well established with the schools in their area. To prepare these case studies, a researcher accompanied a Facilitator to network meetings and took notes of Facilitator activity. Facilitators, network leaders and participants were interviewed using a semi-structured interview schedule. Where possible, the interviews were recorded. Thematic analysis was also carried out on the observations and the interview transcripts. The draft report was shared with the Facilitators and network leaders for further discussion.

In addition, Facilitators themselves were engaged in developing a collective understanding of network facilitation. They would produce documents conceptualising their role as well as training materials and resources to assist in their work. These documents were also drawn on in the preparation of this article.

Overall then, the data from evidence-base in total comprised of 16 interviews with Facilitators, observation of three meetings each of the three regional groups over three months (nine meetings in total), case studies of three networks which included observations of Facilitators in action as well as interviews and finally analysis of Facilitator produced documents about their work.

## **Results**

### **Brokerage practice: Learning and accountability**

Throughout the data collection period, brokers themselves were trying to make sense of their role. They produced their own publications reflecting upon and conceptualising the Facilitator role. A document written early on in the NLG's life identified four domains of activity:

- Development/ Facilitation (for example, coaching or mentoring network leaders);
- Networking (for example, connecting networks to the work of other networks);
- Enquiry and research (for example, researching aspects of network activity using interview or observational methods to share with the programme, other networks or to feed into policy development at the national level);
- Knowledge creation (for example, creating learning materials, writing think pieces or "lessons from" reports to inform network practice).

(Carter et al, 2003, p.11)

In the interviews, Facilitators definitions of their core practice centred on an overarching focus on fostering network learning. Facilitators were concerned with capturing and passing on the knowledge generated within networks and sharing it with other networks, the NLG and policy makers. However, they did not see learning as simply the didactic delivery of knowledge or new ideas to different groups. Facilitators were aware of the history of centralised or outside-in school improvement in the UK and emphasised following the learning needs of the network. They stressed learner-centredness, fostering teacher autonomy and generation of network-specific solutions. To this end, they were focused on transforming understanding through coaching network members, facilitating



reflection and bringing people together for learning encounters. As one Facilitator explained:

*“My job is to connect you to experiences that will help your learning.*

*Not to control what you learn.”*

Facilitators also facilitated reflection on practice in order to “open eyes”, challenge assumptions, explore values, put particular items on the agenda, make the tacit explicit and through challenge, direct networks to attend to particular matters. One Facilitator explained that:

*“My role is to reflect that back to them, share papers which make them reflect, help them recognise this is the case, ask them why and together seek ways forward.”*

In addition to facilitating learning, Facilitators had a role in both outside-in and inside out accountability. Outside-in accountability was concerned with the need to facilitate annual reviews to release further funding or as the network’s critical friends, holding networks to the spirit and moral purpose of the programme. Issues such as inclusion, learning on behalf of others and ensuring pupil learning were prime concerns. Inside-out accountability involved holding networks to their own aspirations and values. Aspects of outside-in accountability could sit uncomfortably with some Facilitators and most seemed drawn to inside-out accountability.

### **Brokerage practice as a boundary practice**

Network facilitation often appeared to be work that occurred at and across network boundaries. They described themselves as a *'bridge'*, a *'conduit'* or *'a node in a wider network'* that could span global, national and local levels. At the same time, despite their attendance at network steering groups, events, one-to-one meetings with network leaders and participation in enquiry activities, Facilitators recognised their position as not only external to the networks but also one-step removed from the core practice of networks. They did not facilitate network activity. They supported the learning of those who facilitated network activity. As explained by one Facilitator:

*"I do not believe it is possible for us to facilitate networks. The co-leaders facilitate the networks. We facilitate the co-leaders. Not necessarily the co-leaders, we facilitate the key people in the network. Often this can be middle leaders, certainly not always the co-leader."*

For some moving from a past role of *'organiser'*, *'doer'*, as a network co-leader or headteacher required a significant and sometimes disconcerting shift in professional orientation or skill set. Facilitators found it challenging. In addition, their role on the boundary of the network presented two challenges:

- The challenge of network access
- The challenge of finding anchors for practice

### ***Accessing networks***

Facilitators needed to build an understanding of the network – the work it was doing, its key players, how people are connected and any disconnections in the structure. To do

this, they needed to access their networks. Having the opportunity to meet with members, attend meetings or events were all considered part of accessing the network. In addition, access seemed to have a broader meaning reflecting the need to develop a face-to-face working relationships and a role in the network so as to participate, influence and learn from the network. While Facilitators had been officially assigned to each network, the formal, programme defined role could only take them so far. One Facilitator reflected on the connection between personally acquired and organisationally assigned credibility:

*“How you gain credibility and authority ... is the most important thing, I think. Is your credibility a criteria of getting access, or is getting access completely a neutral thing that could have been easily facilitated by the programme itself?”*

Other Facilitators reflected that they needed to negotiate a role as a credible, valued and trustworthy part of the network. In pursuit of network access, some Facilitators initiated formal discussions with network leaders to discuss their role. However, a more typical approach was to find way to participate in the life of the network as a NLG representative on a network steering group, observing an enquiry group at work or accompanying participants on a learning walk. They stressed the need to develop the relationship over time and allow a role to emerge as they took part.

The role Facilitators took in the network, and therefore their access to a network, could grow out of a particular combination of network and personal characteristics. For example, the Facilitator’s personal skills or history (being an ex-headteacher or LEA

officer, for example) could carry credibility and status in networks. In addition, the network's stage of development, learning foci, history, needs and priorities also could influence the Facilitator's role in the network. Thus, the role a Facilitator took could change from network to network:

*“Now having been to see all my networks at least once and met with them all at central events I do not have one single definition of facilitation. I don't have a theoretical definition of what I should think, know and feel as a Facilitator.*

Similarly, different stages of network development could change Facilitator involvement. For example, early life networks may need intensive guidance and support while in more established networks, the Facilitator may emphasise capturing the wisdom of experienced network leaders to share with other networks. Experienced leaders may feel Facilitators have little to offer. Facilitators could find it difficult when feeling compelled by the programme to be involved in some way in each network while their skills were not or needed by the members at all:

*‘I thought I was going to go in and help them learn how to do things ... I thought they would value me but they didn't actually need me ... I found it difficult personally’.*

Thus, maintaining access required responding carefully and sensitively to the conditions of each network. In many cases, Facilitators required a sensitive and light touch approach. Some were well aware of the expectations and suspicions that may originate

from the baggage of schools operating in an era of external accountability. Many Facilitators intentionally avoided the expert role or adopted a style different from the roles or relationships traditionally associated with the accountability stance of the Office for Standards in Education (OFSTED) inspector. At the same time though, a significant concern for Facilitators was provoking reflection through challenging discussion. However, the need to challenge had to co-exist with light touch as some Facilitators equated being too challenging with “high risk.” As one Facilitator explained, *‘I could still have the door slammed in my face if I’m not careful.’*

### **The challenges of finding an anchor**

With a workforce of home-based Facilitators dispersed throughout England but frequently on the road as they travelled extensively to meet networks, some initially found themselves feeling isolated in their role. In the early days of their work in the NLG, many Facilitators described themselves as highly active in networks, but uncertain about what they *should* be doing. While they emphasised the need for individual and tailored facilitation work, many sought a common understanding of facilitation practice. Many expressed a need for more parameters, frameworks and direction from the programme to guide their work. Indeed, a Facilitator-written document proposing four core domains of facilitation activity suggested:

*“Here it might be argued, that the fieldwork team is currently constrained by the need for a clear articulation of what it means to operate in these four domains of activity ...”* (Carter, Bond et al. 2003)

These challenges were almost to be expected in a new programme dealing with a new way of working. As the programme developed, Facilitators harnessed opportunities for contact - traveling together to and from events, online forums and informal chats on the telephone – all of which met their needs for support and discussions about practice.

These informal opportunities were later complemented by formally established regional groups which were explicitly organised as learning spaces for discussion and support.

The sessions in the regional groups included processes to promote learning dialogues such as triad discussion and action learning sets. Meetings were characterised by vigorous and challenging debate focused on gaining a deeper understanding of networks and personal practice. Facilitators would interrogate the nature of their networks and their own role or intervention there, plan individual interventions and group events for networks. This collective work was done without losing sight of the allegiance to their networks and the need to “co-construct” activities with them to ensure their interventions were personalised.

As each regional group evolved it began to create a variety of “artifacts” to describe, share and advance practice such as tools to measure the growth state of networks or a ‘network-o-gramme’ tool used to map out network structures. Some of these “tools” were also developed for Facilitators to build their understanding of their work and their networks. They were designed to travel across NLG-network boundaries. For example, while a network growth tool was used among one Facilitator team to help them to understand each other's networks it was also used with networks as a way “to talk to

*networked learning communities with a shared language about where the network as a whole should act first.”*

These tools and procedures can be contrasted with those developed by the wider NLG outside of the regional teams. Facilitators were required to take on activities the NLG considered important for network accountability or for its research programme. For example, they could be asked to follow a particular procedure or use a data collection approach in their first visit to a network, research and report on an aspect of network activity using a set process or follow a prescribed method for a review meeting. To support these activities, tools were also developed at the intersection of different groups in the programme. Senior management (including senior Facilitators), the research team, the regional teams all contributed to the design of these tools and hoped to benefit from the material collected from these processes.

Such tools and their associated procedures set up a tension between NLG-prescribed activities and network needs. For example, a tool to guide practice and to standardise data collection in the first visit to the network was seen by some as providing useful guidance while others felt it prescribed a certain type of visit. As one Facilitator explained:

*“The most significant intervention I made in one of my networks occurred when I got the chance to go to a meeting about their needs not bringing them out to one for our needs.”*

On one level, the threat was that a prescribed framework ran against the ethos of networks as collaborative spaces for bottom-up work:

*“We have to be prepared to adapt to the kind of facilitation they want. If we invite co-construction, we need to be prepared for this. It’s a needs driven model of facilitation.”*

It was felt that teachers were drawn to a network to focus on issues of immediate professional concern rather than on broader purposes. Some Facilitators felt that the tension between meeting NLG needs and network needs could undermine Facilitator relationship building. For example in the following quote a Facilitator describes the first visit to a network:

*“The meeting had to be about what they needed rather than solely collecting data from them. I feel we’re obsessed with collecting, recording and capturing. It’s getting in the way of space to talk, it’s getting in the way of learning and sharing. The first visit to networks shouldn’t feel like it’s about collecting data, it’s about relationship building.”*

So the tensions of drawing a network towards the research or review needs of the national organization were acutely felt by the facilitators. The centrally defined tools and procedures did not necessarily present an inherent problem of prioritising NLG over network needs. Each regional group was not so concerned with rejecting imposed frameworks out of hand. After all, in the early days of the network they wanted more



guidance for their activities. However, they needed the latitude to discuss and negotiate the frameworks and collectively shape Facilitator practice. In other words, to follow the process each regional group used to build their own tools and collective understanding of practice. Indeed, the way in which the organisation handled the negotiation of the tension was important in terms of the Facilitators' own moral compass. The process needed congruence between network practices and values and those of the programme. As one Facilitator explained "*we can't understand NLCs until we become one.*"

## **Conclusion**

With school-based networks becoming part of the school improvement and teacher development agenda, this work on brokerage provides some insights into the issues around supporting their development. It also provides some possible directions for organisations such as Local Education Authorities developing collaborative work or supporting networks.

In their work supporting network development, Facilitators were primarily concerned with fostering learning. The methods they used tended to be facilitative and collaborative. They were concerned less with dictating any agenda than remaining open to what was important to the networks. More than a "conduit of information" (Fielding et al 2005), these Facilitators were, in the oft-used phrase in social constructivist models of learning, less 'sage on the stage than guide on the side.' They were concerned with facilitating reflection and connection with others. In accord with Fielding et al.'s (2005)

work, this finding suggests that facilitators need to have a good understanding of adult learning and mentoring.

The image of brokerage reflects what Fielding et al (2005) referred to as a relationships model of transfer where how you collaborate is as important as what you collaborate on. Indeed, it could be speculated that without a solid relationship, some of the processes underpinning facilitating learning such as challenging network practice to bring about insight would be unsuccessful. This relationships-focused model of brokerage has practical implications for the nature of the work and for organisations involved in supporting networks. The most obvious issue is that of trust and credibility. As Church et al (2003) notes, in the work of a network the quality of relationships enable or disable the processes of acting together, reflecting together and making changes together. Collaborative relationships develop gradually and time is needed for trust building. Participants need to get to know each other and have mutual confidence (Veugelers and Zijlstra 2005). The implication for employing organisations is that while they can facilitate entry to the network by placing the Facilitator in a formal role to work with networks, the individuals themselves must build their own trust and credibility for each network. This is a process that involves a commitment of time and the opportunity to sensitively respond to the conditions of each particular network. Employing organisations must be prepared to play the long game when facilitating networks and commit resources to enable trust and credibility to be built over time.

The second issue related to building relationships is that of enabling participation across organisational boundaries. It is understandable that the regional groups and NLG created what Wenger (1998) would refer to as boundary objects to communicate across organisational boundaries with a shared language or a common frame of reference. Such tools were not only useful in helping Facilitators understand each other's networks and but also to help coordinate perspectives between the programme and the network. As importantly, these tools grew out of the discussions and developments of the Facilitators themselves. They represent the "congealed meanings" of participation (Wenger 1998) in networks. An implication of the importance of these objects is that organisations should take seriously the need to attend to enabling participation across boundaries. However, an important feature of such boundary objects is that they emerge out of participating in the practice itself not as an externally imposed framework. At the same time, it seems important not to confuse such reifications with the participation itself. These boundary objects are only ways of facilitating interaction but should not determine the nature of the engagement itself. As Facilitators noted, they needed to respond to the network's way of doing things. Practitioners need the latitude to improvise around boundary objects.

Responding to the network's way of doing things relates to the dynamic ever changing role of the Facilitator. As networks change, so must the role of the Facilitator. This pattern has been observed elsewhere. In its early days, the network may be more outward focused to draw in new ideas, expand professional and personal vision or to help teachers invent new techniques and processes for improving their practice but over time, it becomes increasingly focused on inside knowledge (Lieberman and Grolnick 1996). As

the Facilitators in this study noted, these shifts in focus demand they reorient their work. As such, working with networks requires a degree of flexibility and dynamism from Facilitators themselves in their need to adjust their approach between different networks but also within a single network as itself changed.

The need for dynamic change from Facilitators has two implications for their role. First, Facilitators need to tune into where their networks are at. This requires spending time with the network and getting to know it. Research on social workers and networks referred to an ethnographic stage in the broker's work involving a kind of participant observation to develop understandings of the network (Trevillion 1999). Without such knowledge and experience, it is likely that any responsiveness would elude the Facilitator. The need for organisations to commit time for this type of work to take place has already been emphasised. Second, well defined roles may be elusive as the nature of their work will change from place to place. Any programme defined standardisation will not always sit comfortably or be appropriate. Facilitators need the organisational latitude to be responsive and improvise in the moment. After all, the role of the Facilitator is relationship-based rather than bureaucracy-based. Facilitators also need support to regularly review their practice, to reflect with others on their pattern of engagement with particular organisations and permission to reshape their role accordingly. This also has implications for the type of person who is suitable to be a facilitator. They need a breadth of experience and a broad repertoire of different ways of working to effectively respond to the particular needs of networks.

So, with a certain degree of dynamism and fluidity a feature of the role (not to mention the problems of working in a new and evolving organisation), is it not surprising that some experienced their position as disorienting or rootless. However, this disorientation is likely to have been ameliorated by the regional groups which provide a supportive base for the Facilitator. In Wenger's (1998) terms these groups can be seen as a community of brokerage practice. They are not only a space to reflect upon and understand better their brokerage work but are also a place to evolve and develop the practice itself. An implication for employing organisations is that they need to attend to the congruence with the principles of collaborative, co-constructed work that underpins network functioning. The community of brokerage practice is an engine to develop practice partly because it models the principles that guide the work itself. Therefore, it needs to match the nature of network activity itself, otherwise it will become less of a resource for facilitator development.

The need for organisations to support, resource and commit to these communities of brokerage practice can not be underestimated. Facilitators are boundary creatures serving the dual agendas of the networks and their employing organisation. These dual tensions were felt acutely by Facilitators who needed the latitude to finesse their work in response to the needs of each organisation. The community of brokerage practice then exists as a buffer zone – a space to mediate between the demands of the employing organisation and the networks and to reflect upon what is necessary in the work. It represents a place that buffers against precariousness in their role by providing a home for their practice. Ultimately then, for the brokers, these boundary creatures working multiple interfaces

and assuming different roles, what is important is a home where they can find the heart of their practice.

With the turn towards networked ways of working, there is a need for more research into network brokerage and facilitation of the depth and rigour that is being seen around the topic of school leadership. This would be a research agenda located not in the study of leader of a single school but of a broker in a networked system concerned with collaborative school improvement. In addition, the challenges in the brokerage role for individuals are not simply a matter of individual practice but for organisations and systems supporting collaboration and networked working. In terms of the Facilitator's need to operate in an organisation that matches the nature of networks, Jackson's (2007) reflections on the system support needed for this work are of interest. He argues that this is a matter of facilitative policy at a national level and of internalising some of the norms and principles of a more networked and collaborative system. He presents this as a challenge for the system - to move beyond hierarchical and bureaucratic ways of operating and to think less of supplying answers but rather, how to provide enablement and support.

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