Connecting Learning Communities: 
Capacity Building for Systemic Change 

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Piecemeal educational reform is yesterday's news. The environment is characterised by increasingly rapid change and complexity. Meanwhile, intractable challenges of quality and equity persist in numbers of jurisdictions, and standards have plateaued in several systems promoting centralised strategies.

Using the same change strategies doesn't make sense, but many systems' models are still based on 17th century scientific theories of simple cause and effect relationships, and on trying to improve individual parts of the system. Many of these strategies have reached the limit of their effectiveness. Against a fast moving backdrop, reformers in some countries have turned to messages from the new sciences that propose a world conception underpinned by webs of relationships with implications for focusing on interconnected systems (eg Capra, 1983; Wheatley, 2006). Because each individual part of the system is affected by others and individual actions have rippling effects on their environment a holistic view is needed of what it will mean to improve any part of the system. In short, we're talking about systemic change.

Bringing about systemic change is a change in itself, and a major one at that. Sustainable change depends on an ongoing process of learning by individuals, singly and collectively. This means both better learning and learning in new ways. But it's not just learning. As, parts of the system previously unreached are now as significant as those traditionally receiving all of the attention, people at all levels of the system need to learn. Different parts of the system must also be aligned to provide a coherent and consistent picture and strategy for change, and this means
that people with diverse roles in the system have to connect and learn together. What's we're talking about is connecting learning communities. Learning communities are inclusive, reflective, mutually supportive and collaborative groups of people who find ways, inside and outside their immediate community to investigate and learn more about their practice in order to improve all students’ learning. To have a system where the idea and practices of learning communities are the norm and where learning communities connect with other learning communities doesn't just happen; capacity building is necessary.

In this chapter, I first define what I mean by capacity and capacity building, before exploring connected learning communities. I examine who needs to be involved and describe an example illustrating a connected learning community. Finally, I propose sets of learning processes and connecting conditions that appear to underlie capacity building for systemic change that is generated through connected learning communities.

**Building capacity**

What makes schools, school systems and the people within them ongoing, capable learners? It requires going beyond identifying a number of different improvement-related capacities. Separating out capacities insufficiently captures the complexity, interconnectedness and potential of different facets of the change process, especially right now. Capacity has to be viewed as a more generic and holistic concept (Stoll, 1999). In relation to systemic educational change, it can be seen as the power to engage in and sustain learning of people at all levels of the educational system for the collective purpose of enhancing student learning. Capacity is a quality that allows people, individually and collectively, routinely to learn from the world around them and to apply this learning to new situations so that they can continue on a path toward their goals in an ever-changing context (Stoll and Earl, 2003). It also helps them continuously to improve learning and progress at all levels, but particularly and ultimately that of students such that their collective efficacy is enabling them to "raise the bar and close the gap of student learning for all students" (Fullan, 2006, p.28). Capacity, therefore, is oriented towards making a difference for all students and in all aspects of learning (Delors et al, 1996).
system with capacity is also able to take charge of change because it is adaptive. In short, capacity lies at the root of success (Fullan, 2006).

Capacity exists at different levels: in individuals – personal capacity; in groups within organisations; and in whole organisations, whether schools, districts or departments/ministries of education. We’ve known for some time that successful educational reform depends on teachers’ individual and collective capacity (eg Lieberman, 1995), school capacity (King and Newmann, 2001) and system capacity (Elmore, 2002). But the significance of the "mutually influencing and interdependent" nature of different levels (Mitchell and Sackney, 2001) has only more recently become clearer, and this is what matters most for systemic change. Essentially capacity building has to attend to all levels simultaneously.

To bring about systemic change, capacity building has to be "multifaceted" (Fullan, 2006, p.85), comprising of:

- creating and maintaining the necessary conditions, culture and structures;
- facilitating learning and skill-oriented experiences and opportunities;
- ensuring interrelationships and synergy between all the component parts (Stoll and Bolam, 2005).

Connecting learning communities demonstrate the multifaceted nature of capacity building at work. Who do we mean when we refer to connecting learning communities?

**Membership of connecting learning communities**

We all belong to different communities. They’re generally held together by shared beliefs and understandings, interaction and participation, interdependence, concern for individual and minority views, and meaningful relationships through personal connections (Westheimer, 1999). Increasingly, communities aren’t just face-to-face but virtual, with soaring numbers of people connecting through social networking
sites. Those involved tend to view the group as a collective enterprise and, as shared memory develops, it’s passed on to newcomers. Collaboration is a norm for most communities. But communities don't have to be concerned with learning, so in considering capacity building for systemic change in education, those of particular interest are ones with learning at their core, as defined above. These focus on the learning of all of their members, and most especially on enhancing learning for and of all children and young people.

Learning communities can be found at all levels of the educational system. Within schools there are classroom learning communities (Watkins, 2005), including those between students networked by technology (Scardamalia and Bereiter, 1994; Brown and Campione, 1998) that also provides opportunities for international online student learning conferences; communities among groups of teachers sharing and analysing their work (Little, 2002; McLaughlin and Talbert, 2006; Thompson and Willam, 2007), sometimes referred to as communities of practice (cf. Lave and Wenger, 1991); and communities operating at whole school level (eg Louis, Kruse et al, 1995; Bolam et al, 2005), frequently known as professional learning communities, and sometimes including support staff (eg Bolam et al, 2007). Personnel in school districts also collaborate as enquiry and learning communities (eg Stoll and Temperley, 2008 forthcoming).

At the policy level, while knowledge is viewed as social, growing from previous ideas and relationships (Levin, 2007), the concept of policy learning communities is little articulated (Stoll, 2008). Scanning government websites, however, highlights cases of such activity. For example, the Ontario Ministry of Education’s Research Coordination team, a Ministry-wide committee, has a specific remit to identify and respond to Ministry staff’s own capacity-building needs by creating new opportunities for sharing knowledge and effective practices across the ministry as well as offering learning sessions for colleagues. Other communities exist within the educational system, for example, research communities, although the emphasis in university education departments has historically often been focused on individual achievement, tending to inhibit the kind of collaborative learning of interest here.
If each of these groups or organisations is viewed as a system, developing a thriving and challenging learning community offers the potential for positive change within any of these systems. However, it is when learning communities cross the boundaries of particular organisations or interest groups that systemic change on a broad scale is most likely. Any one group of stakeholders is likely to be insufficient to serve the needs of all students in diverse contexts, as well as bringing about the changes required in a complex and fast changing world. This suggests that a more divergent approach to the concept of professional learning communities is needed, to include systemic extensions with broader membership and involving divergent knowledge bases (Stoll and Louis, 2007). The term 'professional learning communities', itself, may come across as exclusive, even though it is intended to be inclusive.

From a social capital perspective, this means that 'bonding' social capital – building trust and networks with people of similar demographic characteristics – is insufficient. 'Bridging' social capital, while still horizontal in nature, extends links to others who don't share many of the same characteristics, whereas 'linking' social capital (eg Grootaert et al, 2004) sees connections that are vertical in nature, operating across power differentials.

There are increasing numbers of examples of 'bridging social capital': through learning networks of teachers in different schools (Lieberman and Wood, 2001); between leaders of schools, both nationally and internationally (Stoll et al, 2007); and between whole schools (Veugelers and O'Hair, 2005; Earl and Katz, 2006), as well as many other collaborative arrangements established for a range of educational and financial reasons. Networking connections also exist between superintendents of different school districts, extending opportunities for members to co-construct new knowledge as they learn from experience and practice of peers elsewhere.
In many ways, learning networks, or networked learning communities as they are sometimes known (eg Jackson and Temperley, 2007) are professional learning communities operating across a broader landscape. They share many commonalities with school-based professional learning communities and some similar goals. But their additional purposes include enlarging individual schools’ repertoire of choices, and moving ideas and good practice around the system in order to help transform the whole system, not just individual schools, thus improving education for *all* students. This lateral capacity building (Fullan, 2006) is collective responsibility and moral purpose writ large. Teacher learning benefits are well documented (eg Lieberman and Wood, 2001), but evidence is also emerging of links with student outcomes (eg Kaser and Halbert, 2005; Earl et al, 2006). The potential of learning networks’ positive influence on the development of leadership capacity is also appealing at a time when succession planning is an issue in many countries due to impending retirements of large numbers of school principals (Pont et al, 2008). While networked learning is seen to support sustainability (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006a), a strong internal professional learning community is still necessary because most new knowledge and learning gained through network experience is channelled back into schools where changed practice has its main impact (Earl and Katz, 2006).

Where ‘linking social capital’ is concerned, a long research tradition has generally concentrated on what parents and the wider community can do for schools, although recent research presents a multi-directional perspective (Mulford, 2007). As greater numbers of multi-agency communities are formed to address the social, health and wellbeing challenges that teachers clearly can't address alone (eg Cummings et al, 2007; Mitchell and Sackney, 2007), power issues need to be tackled head on, as people ask ‘whose community is this?’ This suggests that a more fruitful approach might be to see this as bridging diverse partners of equal status. The relationship between learning and community becomes multifaceted (Stoll et al, 2003) as well as multi-directional. Taking parents as an example, it's possible to see *learning of* community, where the school helps the parents support their children's learning and may help promote community development; *learning from* community, as they share their knowledge with the school; *learning with* community, as exemplified in schools
that involve students, their parents and teachers in intergenerational dialogue; learning for community, to enhance relationships; and learning as community, that is "deeply inclusive and broadly connected" and based on deep respect, collective responsibility, appreciation of diversity, a problem-solving orientation and positive role modelling (Mitchell and Sackney, 2007).

How can this multi-directional learning community relationship be applied to relationships between different stakeholder communities? The following example of the Austrian Leadership Academy (LEA, 2007) illustrates an attempt to build a connected learning community to build systemic capacity. It was selected as a case study during the OECD’s Improving School Leadership activity (Pont et al, 2008) to illustrate innovative practice in leadership development. In 2004 the Austrian Minister of Education, Science, and Culture founded the Academy, in association with the Universities of Innsbruck and Zurich. Its initial intent was to prepare school headteachers – who possessed newly acquired autonomy but had little experience in operating outside a hierarchical, bureaucratic structure – with the capacity to act more independently, take greater initiative, and manage their schools through changes entailed by a stream of government reforms. Quickly, the benefits of involving a wider group of participants became apparent, and the Leadership Academy (LEA) began including district inspectors, staff of teacher training institutes, and executives from the Ministry of Education and provincial education authorities. These participants learn together in four forums, where they are introduced through a range of creative pedagogical techniques to research on leadership for learning, school development and personal capacity, which they are invited to reflect on and explore. They also select and work with a learning partner and a collegial coaching team (3 pairs of learning partners) in and between the forums, focusing on a development problem that each person brings to the group. The change in relationships, attitudes, and orientation to leadership for the vast majority of LEA participants has produced a groundswell at the various levels of the system where people have been involved – schools, districts, regions, teacher training institutes, and parts of the Ministry. Ministry leaders who have participated for the most part find the programme and experience as powerful as their peers, some particularly valuing the connections they make with school and inspector colleagues (Stoll et al, 2007). Involvement of the head of one Ministry Directorate
had a particularly powerful effect on the system when he followed up his participation by replicating LEA learning processes with all of his Directorate staff.

This example represents an effort to build systemic capacity by developing learning and leadership connections across community boundaries. These communities – school leaders, district and regional leaders, Ministry leaders and leaders from teacher training institutes – are learning together and making the connections. So what the kinds of learning processes and activities are developed in such connecting communities?

**Learning processes and activities in connecting learning communities**

Learning communities engage in many joint activities. The focus here is on processes and activities oriented towards community learning. Individuals and groups need access to multiple sources of learning, but in connecting learning communities the social component of learning processes takes centre stage. Learning communities deconstruct knowledge through joint reflection and analysis, reconstructing it through collaborative action, and co-constructing it through collective learning from their experiences. Processes and activities involved are interconnected and can be construed in different ways. In this chapter I have chosen to describe them as supported practice, collaborative inquiry, knowledge animation, joint planning and review, and meta-learning. At the heart of all of this activity are dialogue and learning conversations (see Figure 1).
Dialogue and learning conversations

Dialogue is the key mechanism by which members of communities connect; not discussion or debate. Debate depends on the dominance of one position over another, while discussion avoids 'undiscussables', blocking true and honest communication (Bohm, 1985). Dialogue is a critical community process, although difficult to achieve, because all participants play equal roles, suspending their individual assumptions as they enter into a genuine "thinking together" (Senge, 1990). In connecting learning communities, dialogic processes are oriented towards articulating and exploring members' tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Through dialogue, presuppositions, ideas and beliefs are brought to the surface, examined and challenged. Collective intelligence is harnessed, and new ideas and practices are created as initial knowledge is enhanced or transformed.

Learning conversations involve dialogue but the learning goal is more overt. A learning conversation in connecting learning communities can be seen as a planned and systematic approach to professional dialogue that supports community members to reflect on their practice. As a result, they gain new knowledge which
they use to improve their practice (definition adapted from GTC, 2004). Reflection on process is intentionally built in. Learning conversations typically feature questioning and active listening.

Both dialogue and learning conversations are fundamental to the process of connecting learning communities. When operating at their optimum level, the following learning processes and activities all feature genuine dialogue and actively promote learning conversations.

**Supported practice**

New ways of learning don’t come easily: learning means coming to terms with different ideas and ways of doing things. This usually necessitates trying something out again and again, tinkering (Huberman, 1998) working at it, feeling uncomfortable for a while, and experiencing new responses. A systematic review of evidence on the effect of sustained, collaborative continuing professional development on teaching and learning highlights benefits of peer support to teachers’ practice (Cordingley et al, 2003). Learning and teaching are strengthened when teachers support each other in examining new methods, questioning ineffective practices, and supporting each other’s growth (Little, 2005), for example through focused peer observation and feedback across communities, coaching and mentoring. In connecting learning communities, particularly those involving stakeholders with diverse knowledge bases and skills, supported practice is likely to be enhanced by different partners bringing an open mind to the process, acting as critical friends (Costa and Kallick, 1993), and asking challenging but supportive questions that lead their partner to reflect deeply on their practice.

**Collaborative inquiry**

Collaborative inquiry is a key learning process, where learning and inquiry are facilitated, encouraged, challenged and co-constructed (Jackson and Street, 2005).
Inquiry can be the means by which teachers identify important issues related to learning, become self-regulated drivers for acquiring the necessary knowledge to solve the issues, monitor the impact, and adjust practice as necessary (Timperley et al, 2007). As a basis for professional learning, inquiry builds teachers' knowledge of their own practice (Cochrane Smith and Lytle, 2001). Here, colleagues from different schools, agencies or other stakeholder groups throughout the system decide on a common issue as an inquiry focus and commit to exploring this together using common methodology. Sometimes, they gather data in their own site while at other times they collect data from each other's sites before analysing the data jointly. Collaborative review activities, such as moderating samples of students' work across sites, or reviewing support for students and their families across a whole community partnership, also provide data for such analysis.

Evidence-based dialogue carried out in a spirit of inquiry has the potential to promote powerful professional learning because as people engage in conversations about what evidence means, new knowledge can emerge as they come across new ideas or discover that ideas that they believe to be true don't hold up when under scrutiny and this recognition is used as an opportunity to rethink what they know and do (Earl and Timperley, 2008). Such collaborative inquiry skills are new for many educators which mean investing time and expert support in their development (Earl and Katz, 2006).

Knowledge animation

Sharing knowledge between different communities – including learning experiences, the findings of collaborative inquiry and other research – can be challenging. What makes sense to and works well one community may not easily translate, and yet a core activity of connecting learning communities is sharing knowledge that might help enhance others’ practice. Ways are needed to bring knowledge to life such that others can engage with the ideas, locate them within their context and in relation to prior experiences and learning, make meaning, and construct new knowledge from them that can be used to develop their practice. This learning is social as learners
test the veracity of their beliefs and knowledge by comparing them to the beliefs and knowledge of others and together they relate this to other external knowledge, processing it jointly and thereby creating new knowledge. A model of three fields of knowledge from England's National College for School Leadership's Networked Learning Communities (NCSL 2006) programme captures this relationship (see Figure 2).

Figure 1: Three Fields of Knowledge

I describe this process of connections as knowledge animation. The word ‘animate’ comes from the Latin word ‘anima’ which means breath, life or soul. Animate means to bring to life, put in motion. It suggests action and movement, dynamism and vibrancy, invigoration and innovation. The focus of knowledge animation is helping people to learn and use knowledge generated elsewhere and, through it to create valuable new knowledge (Stoll, 2008). Knowledge animation can be seen as ways of making knowledge accessible and mobile to help people make the necessary learning connections that enable them to put knowledge to use in their contexts. As learning communities generate knowledge they want to share, they need to be thinking of knowledge animation strategies that will help others make the necessary
learning connections, also ensuring that they engage in quality assurance processes so they do not share mediocre practice. Knowledge animation is also a way that the research community can connect with practitioner and policy communities.

Meta-learning with peers

Members of learning communities need to understand their own learning and internalise learning as a ‘habit of mind’. Meta-learning (Watkins et al, 1998) not only means each member of a community demonstrating that they are a learner, but also engaging in in-depth learning about their own learning: their goals, strategies, feelings, effects and contexts of learning. In particular, in connecting learning communities, it means taking time to focus together on what all of the diverse members understand about their collective learning and knowledge creation, the conditions that support these, and what these mean for the way they collaborate.

Conditions supporting learning community connections

Processes and activities that connecting learning communities engage in depend on the right supporting conditions to motivate and sustain them. Here, I focus on three key conditions – a common culture, trusting and respectful relationships and supportive structures – and a fourth overarching one, leadership (see Figure 3).
A common culture

Communities' values and beliefs play a major role in how they see themselves and operate, the norms of acceptable behaviour and practice and even the language they use to express themselves. Lave and Wenger (1992) propose that when learning in communities of practice, participants gradually absorb and are absorbed in a ‘culture of practice’, giving them exemplars that lead to shared meanings, a sense of belonging and increased understanding. The kind of deep learning processes on which learning communities depend are best supported and nurtured in a culture that values such processes and creates opportunities for them to occur. This requires two shifts in mindset and expectation at all levels of the system: first, that engaging in collaborative learning is not just other people’s business – everyone must keep learning; second that whenever people are learning, they are not only learning for themselves, but on behalf of others (NCSL, 2006) – this is the commitment to a wider moral purpose that characterises a systemic approach.
A challenging issue when different learning communities connect is coming to common understandings because the communities often use different language. So, while educators tend to see a child as a 'learner', for parents he or she is 'my child', whilst social workers may see an 'abused child' and health workers tend to see a 'patient'. This creates opportunities for misunderstanding and conflict as learning communities consider the purposes for and focus of their collaboration and when they are implementing plans. Openness to learning about other communities is therefore essential; unless people make the effort to understand where others are coming from, the potential of connecting learning communities is unlikely to be realised.

*Trusting, respectful and equal relationships*

Connecting learning communities is a human and emotional enterprise with the associated complexity of bringing about change. Developing social capital depends on positive relationships (Field, 2003) and working together productively requires collegiality and interdependence between people that allows serious challenge and adjustment of practice; as Earl and Katz (2006) have described learning networks, "rigorous and challenging joint work". While personal friendships aren't necessary, dysfunctional relationships clearly have a negative effect. Each person needs to feel that they are a valued participant with something to offer (Mitchell and Sackney, 2007). Without a climate of trust and respect, people don't feel safe to take the risks associated with collaboration, open dialogue and opening up their practice to potential scrutiny by others. Equality is also important in the orientation to learning processes; for example how coaching group members involved in the Austrian Leadership Academy rotated roles such that no one person becomes the sole expert. Coaching therefore becomes an equal partnership where both parties learn (Robertson, 2008).

Social trust among members of staff has been found to be the strongest facilitator of professional community within schools (Bryk et al, 1999). A base level of such trust seems necessary for learning communities to emerge. In networks and online communities, collaborative relationships appear to build trust and respect, essential
for willingness to collaborate, risk taking and the exchange and development of ideas (Kahne et al, 2001). This becomes particularly important in contexts where schools have been used to a climate of competition, and also seems to be predicated on networks involving voluntary participation and collaboration. Building trust across diverse communities can be even more challenging, where hostile perceptions of other groups may have previously prevailed. Trusting relationships are insufficient on their own, but the evidence appears overwhelming that they are essential to connect learning communities if there is to be any chance of success.

**Supportive structures**

Structures shape organisations' capacity to develop learning communities. At their best, structures enable better and deeper communication between members of learning communities. While coordination, communication mechanisms, joint governance structures and collaborative plans are all important, I have chosen here to focus on two particular structures, time and space.

*Time* is a critical resource for any meaningful learning (Stoll et al, 2003). Talk, exchange about and joint reflection on professional issues are key elements of the collaborative activity necessary to develop and connect learning communities. These require time, which doesn't only mean being able to cover staff who engage in network activities, including visiting other schools or attending meetings in the local community, but how any of the organisations involved plan and organise their time such that learning with and from communities beyond them can be fed back into their internal learning community and reconstructed to create new knowledge appropriate to their context and needs. The challenge is to find creative ways to deal with the perennial challenges of time, or else learning community activities just become an ‘add on’ to an already overloaded agenda. In the Austrian example, time was allocated for the learning and networking sessions, although some participants talked of challenges of finding time and efforts to structure in time to follow up outside these sessions.
Space can also be a facilitating condition, and one with interesting shifts in meaning. In schools, professional exchange is facilitated by physical proximity (e.g., Louis, Kruse et al., 1995), for example teachers in a department having neighbouring classrooms and interdependent teaching roles, such as team teaching and joint planning. In learning networks, the need for equality and equal access between partners suggests that meetings and school and classroom visits should be rotated around schools, whilst similar concerns in extended learning communities implies that meetings should either be rotated around the different community partner locations e.g. schools, health centres, police stations etc or held within neutral community locations such as community centres or coffee shops. Coffee houses were known in the 18th Century as locations for stimulating and sociable conversations, offering a combination of both intimate and private spaces as well as ones that were public and open to speakers of all status, wealth or power (Ellis, 2004). In the coffee house, everyone’s contributions were treated as equal.

Community space now includes the virtual space through which networks of users of the internet connect and communicate. In this world of mass collaboration through ‘wikinomics’, democratic networks of individuals are sharing, adapting, and updating knowledge (Tapscott and Williams, 2008). The internet also provides a connecting communication mechanism when time to meet is hard to find. Essentially, connecting learning communities means rethinking the meaning of ‘location’ and ‘space’.

Leadership and external facilitation

Leadership provides the energy source; it is the umbrella within which all other conditions and processes of connecting learning communities sit. Communities depend on key individuals’ involvement to keep processes going and facilitate enabling conditions. In learning communities within, between and beyond schools, leadership isn’t just the realm of senior leaders in organisations, although their commitment is important (e.g., Bolam et al., 2005; Earl and Katz, 2006). Rather, the evidence points to the importance of distributed leadership; reciprocal leadership actions of people at different levels and from various stakeholders. Distributed
leadership and empowerment, important for professional learning communities within schools (Hargreaves and Fink, 2006b), also contributes to success of learning networks (Hopkins et al, 2003; Wohlstetter et al, 2003), with decisions being taken at the place of greatest action. Taking distributed leadership seriously means being committed to collective responsibility.

Leadership is a facilitator, but external facilitation and support for connecting learning communities can also make a difference, as the example highlights. External agents may bring specialist expertise as mediators of community dialogue, or supporting networks’ inquiry efforts, for example by helping members interpret and use data (Lee, 2008). Facilitation takes on a particularly significant role in networks and networked learning communities, and can be key to success (Wohlstetter et al, 2003).

Conclusion

Systemic capacity building depends on harnessing and channelling collective energy. It means paying attention to developing deep and positive learning relationships within and across different levels of the system and connecting educators with communities and agencies whose interests or remits go beyond education but who, fundamentally, share a common interest in the present and future wellbeing and success of children and young people. Such collaborative, connected learning can be extremely powerful as common understandings and shared knowledge are co-constructed, but this depends on serious and equal participation of members of diverse communities. Such collective commitment and openness takes time and effort to develop, but is essential if learning communities are to connect meaningfully and achieve systemic change.

References


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1 With grateful thanks to Lorna Earl and Julie Temperley who commented on an earlier draft.