



London Gifted and Talented Learning Communities



Tips for implementing learning communities for busy people

London Gifted and Talented develops high quality programmes to challenge learners in schools and to support teachers. Part of the provision is training programmes for teachers in schools in the London Boroughs (although available to other teachers for a fee). The focus of the development programmes is to enable teachers to stretch and challenge their most gifted pupils through daily learning and teaching. At the heart of all the programmes are cutting-edge e-resources and online tools.

London G&T (www.londongt.org) set up Learning Networks for teachers, currently 27. The aim is to reach as many teachers as possible in both Primary and Secondary Schools. Interaction is primarily on-line with the idea that teachers will share their own knowledge and expertise collaborating with colleagues from other schools and building resources for use by all.

By December 2007 (15 months after the project commenced) 803 educators located in 382 schools use the learning networks. All participants have reported an improved capacity to plan and provide for gifted and talented pupils, and a positive impact on their pupils' skills, motivation and attainment as a result of the learning activities delivered in school. Individuals have also continued to share and learn from each other after the official closure of each network. They are also more likely to share with others not in the original network, for example in other schools, or governors, spreading best practice and good ideas; true informal learning.

- *“Over the years I have attended many courses and been involved in a lot of distance learning, but I can honestly say this has been the most valuable and worthwhile learning experience I have been involved in for a*



- long time. I am only sorry that the course as such ends on Wednesday. I know that it has opened my eyes to new resources and new approaches to teaching, which I will now firmly embed in my practice. Thank you to everyone”*
- *“The interaction with teachers from so many other schools was good - schools can be insular places. People were very generous with sharing their ideas and resources, many of which either I used myself or passed on to colleagues.”*

What are the ingredients for making this collaboration work?

1. Blended Learning

As reported elsewhere in the Towards Maturity research and associated case studies on-line study will never be the sole provider of learning and a blended approach is used. The learning networks are launched with a face-to-face session. Members meet, share ideas and get expert input on resources and strategies to take back to the classroom. Blending is not just a question of mixing face-to-face sessions with on-line sessions and study. What is done in these initial sessions is critical to success. The face-to-face meeting helps future interactions and peer-to-peer discussions, effectively “breaking the ice”. These are opportunities for members to get to know each other and to build trust. This trust in each other is reinforced in future face-to-face and online interactions.

2 Setting an example

Participants in the initial workshop are able to try out and practice good use of the website. Tools such as blogs and discussion boards need to be clearly demonstrated for members to be confident in the technical aspects involved in using them and to understand how they can be used to facilitate dialogue and collaboration. Taking the time in the first day to help participants complete practical tasks really improved usage of the site.

Members are shown the various facilities; they can post their first blog, comment and respond in discussion threads, share reflections, access resources and participate in activities having already learnt the mechanics of using the website. They see someone using the on-line tools; they experience the use of the on-line tools themselves in a supportive and risk free environment. They do not feel exposed by the casual competence of pupils; they can practice with others with similar knowledge and experience to themselves.



The site was carefully designed with easily understood, streamlined online content and resources. Similar and familiar structures were used throughout but users may still get lost in an unfamiliar session structure.

Members were also more comfortable with training their colleagues when they practiced activities which they could use back in school

3. Gaining Agreement to Action

Another key support to success is to use the initial session to obtain promises from participants; a learning contracting process. Collaboration requires all participants to contribute. For many learners this is a hurdle. At the initial face-to-face meeting members agree to complete relevant assignments designed to be shared with others. This agreement to action right at the start of each learning network gives an impetus to the collaboration. Sharing and working together gets off to a flying start.

4. Leadership and administration

Each learning network has a dedicated network leader with expertise in the focus area and experience of working with educators to facilitate change. This is a combined coach and tutor role in that the leader has both technical competency in the subject and the capability to encourage, motivate and give feedback.

- > The Leader will promote a participant-led model. They are 'guides on the side' rather than a 'sage on the stage'. Their key role is to facilitate network activity and provide appropriate guidance and coaching.
- > They must gain network members' trust and inspire them from the beginning. They will be open, accurate and honest about the commitment early on.
- > They use the website as the main communication and sharing tool.
- > They will set an example by using the tools, methods and approaches they want participants to adopt
- > However every participant is different so leaders try out different ways to engage everyone and encourage and direct future learning

There is also a network coordinator to handle routine queries and giving both network leaders and members a defined point of contact readily available (although only during pre-arranged hours; typically office hours).

5. Purpose of each Learning Network

Each learning networks has a defined focus. For example, how do you increase the proportion of A and A* grades within your school at GCSE? How can you deliver a science curriculum in year 6 which engages and inspires pupils,



introduces high level concepts and delivers results in the KS2 SATs? How can you make effective use of e-resources to enhance learning in KS3 science? Keeping this focus helps users retain the purpose of the collaboration. One of the elements of peer-to-peer collaboration is that it can range widely and pursue avenues of exploration that interest individuals. This is always worthwhile for the individuals involved and the personal blogs give this opportunity. However in thread discussion ranging away from the topic makes it difficult for others who may arrive in the middle of a thread that does not seem to relate to why they joined the learning network. Keeping focus heightens the sense of purpose. Only network leaders were given the right to create new threads helping to retain structure, order and keeping the momentum going.

6. Short Duration

Educators have as little available time as anyone in commerce or industry. Common practice is to spread involvement in e-learning and on-line collaboration over time to minimise the week by week impact. In practice the reverse is true. Better results with more collaboration have been achieved with short focussed networks lasting perhaps ten or twelve weeks (a typical term). As one network leader suggested, having “the end in sight throughout” concentrates member’s minds and gives greater energy to the network experience.

7. Work-based activities – relevance to the job

Responses from members in the final session generally acknowledge that whatever the time frame they are given they find it difficult to fit in the assignments and learning activities. It is important that these activities are built into what they are already doing at school, rather than being something additional. This is influenced both by the design of the input and the attitude of the participants. They must make the mental step of realising the learning is all focused in their normal day-to-day work-based activities, not something academic and theoretical but something immediate and practical.

Perhaps assignments is the wrong description but every participant designs and delivers learning activities, tailored to their pupils’ needs, which utilise the resources and strategies introduced in the course. Tasks are directly relevant to the individual and their work situation. These learning activities are then shared with colleagues through the website. Each learner benefits by putting their own ideas into practice and from the ideas of others; a twentyfold return on their own work.



8. Expert Input

Whilst the aim of the network is to get teachers learning from each other many also value 'expert input' – particularly during the early stages of the network. The early sessions have an equal balance between fostering sharing and discussion, and providing resources and strategies which members can take away and put into practice immediately. This is Situational Leadership™ in practice. The network leader moves naturally from a tutoring and instructional role to that of coaching and facilitating as the participants gain in confidence and ability

9. Accessibility

The site is designed to be fully accessible, conforming to W3C Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 1.0 and short cut keys are provided for those who prefer or are unable to use a pointing device. The site will be compatible with screen readers. A broad definition of accessibility includes equality by location as well as disability. Schools' security setting on their firewalls are often very high and the functionality of the site was kept really simple to minimise the possibility of being blocked. Site navigation, discussion threads interaction is kept straightforward to help those who were infrequent users. Leaders posted bulletins highlighting changes specifically to help these infrequent users.

Benefits

Participants report changes in attitudes, teaching and pupil responses. Their discussions reflect :

- > their keenness to integrate ideas and resources within their departments;
- > their realisation that they can take risks in their teaching; and
- > the positive changes in behaviour from pupils when they are given responsibility for their own learning.

One science teacher with 30 years of experience within the classroom was inspired to become more adventurous, using whole class role play strategies in order to promote higher order questioning for the first time.

All pupils benefit, not just the more able. An early years teacher commented: "I will also use these problem solving activities with all of the children in the class, as my recent work has shown that all children benefit from this style of learning and level of expectation!"

Other comments are equally positive.



Online collaboration

- *I'm really enjoying the website - I'm a big text and e-mail fan. I'm quite hesitant socially so I find it all rather liberating! I have never blogged before, but your site is brilliantly user friendly...*

Changing the way things are done

- *I will be more adventurous in the difficulty of the texts I use with students and allow a more open ended approach to give choice in how they (G&T students) present their knowledge. I have gone from being a bit sceptical about G&T to being a convert.*
- *(Following staff training) I was really thrilled to see the impact in classrooms. I had many teachers coming to me and describing how excited their children had become when discussing strategies. It was then that they really appreciated that by providing for the more able we become better at identifying them. They cited several examples of children who came up with very perceptive comments, who they had not considered to be particularly able in this area previously. If we remove the restrictions - we can see how high the children can go.*
- *I have just had a very successful lesson observation, observed by my headteacher, which incorporated a lot of the principles of good practise we have been sharing on the course (ie encouraging higher level investigation, open questioning etc.) My head, with my SENCo, has now agreed to release some of my time so that I can "team teach" with colleagues in school and disseminate good practise re teaching the more able.*

To find out more about London Gifted & Talented's work, please go to www.londongt.org 'or contact liz.worthen@londongt.org'