

Notes from James Wisdom's Talk

Starting with FDTL as an example relevant to Subject Centres (part of James' role is with NCT working with projects applying for transferability money.) and taking SAPHE as an example. It has finished its transferability process. The end product of the initial programme was a "hard-edged" core group of *circa* 30 in the network and a wider network of 200-300. After transferability, the network dissipated but individuals have taken the experience with them. Money was *not* the reason for this, more a natural end—it lives on in other places. When would you evaluate the success or the impact of the project? This can only be measured after a period of time, but when and how? Do the Subject Centres have a role here?

What happens to all the information after the project has gone? Now projects have to show support from the relevant Subject Centre for transferability, so can the Subject Centres pick up this work? As projects develop, they tend to recognise the generic ideas and practices within them. It appears to be much easier when there is a product (and most if not all projects at least have a web site with materials), but products alone are not sufficient to encourage change—we need to find the networking energy with the people who have the experience and commitment. Grids or matrices of classified information will not, of themselves, change HE practice—it requires people, expertise, debate and local application—the sort of skills people in a network can bring. Some FDTL projects became Subject Centres and therefore took their networks with them, so they have a distinct advantage.

(Subject Centre staff don't have time to trawl all projects for relevant info. Isn't this the job of the Generic Centre?) Subject Centres need generic materials, but in their subject specific language otherwise their people won't use it. The NCT web site is a good source of information on the projects (though it is not yet organised in generic themes). Subject Centres have a brokerage role pointing academics towards sources of info. and looking "over the fence" into other disciplines. Trying to avoid duplication and reinventing wheels by translating what's available into a form which is acceptable to their specific community. One of the processes of networking is crossing boundaries (in this case disciplines) to bring ideas and people into the network, to animate it.

DfEE Discipline Networks were monitored to death. We have learned from this.

Some aspects of networking:

Motivation: people join networks because of shared interests, the possibility of enhancing practice; perhaps overcoming isolation. We must recognise that emotions play a part in networks – the heart matters as much as the head, affection and intelligence together.

Etiquette: Consider how people join networks, develop within them and leave them. Notions of trust, security, equality, how to welcome people, the obligation of members to participate, perhaps an initial feeling when joining is to sit back and listen—is this lurking? How to encourage people to move from listening to contributing. Recognising the obligation of established members to keep an open and inclusive character to the network by fostering good relationships..

Life Cycle: There are two life cycles – one, the individual's within the network; the other, the network itself.

For the individual : When you join you often listen, then join in slowly, finding a support/friendship group within the network. This is not just a core-periphery relationship, there are layers of experience from the newcomer to the old lag and each can meet their needs in a good network. There may be specific interest groups also. Do you ever really leave a network? Moving on is usually work related – though some felt that the network stayed with you long afterwards.

For the network itself: It will have a life cycle (i.e. it will end) if it does not refresh itself with new participants. As its participants become more experienced, they have to keep space open for newcomers. If the first generation members want a network to continue they will have to change to accommodate the second etc. If not, then the network is created, does its work, then comes to an end.

Value: Do networks support your job, or are they your job? Is networking written into your job description? It's part of your continuing professional development and should be recognised as part of the job, not as the use of work time for personal benefit.

Animating the information: How to cross networks? NetCulture has had to do this. Their approach has been to network their networks, but this has had to be done face to face. Very important to find a shared language. It has to be mutually beneficial to the networks.

How to evaluate networks. See evaluation as a monitoring process rather than a researched product, because often by the time the product is available the world has changed. Evaluation needs to be iterative, on-going and done internally. What feeds into policy is the language and the questions; as the project learns more, so the language and the questions develop; so the policy changes. The paper by Ray Rist noted that policy making itself is a continuous process, not a once-for-all researched ultimate truth. But is HE getting more business-based and therefore requiring quantitative measures? We need the best and most appropriate evaluation, so qualitative approaches must be used – they will encompass quantitative measures.

Reference: James recommended Chapter 39 of *Handbook of Qualitative Research* (second edition, 2000) edited by Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln. The chapter is: *Influencing the Policy Process with Qualitative Research* by Ray C. Rist