

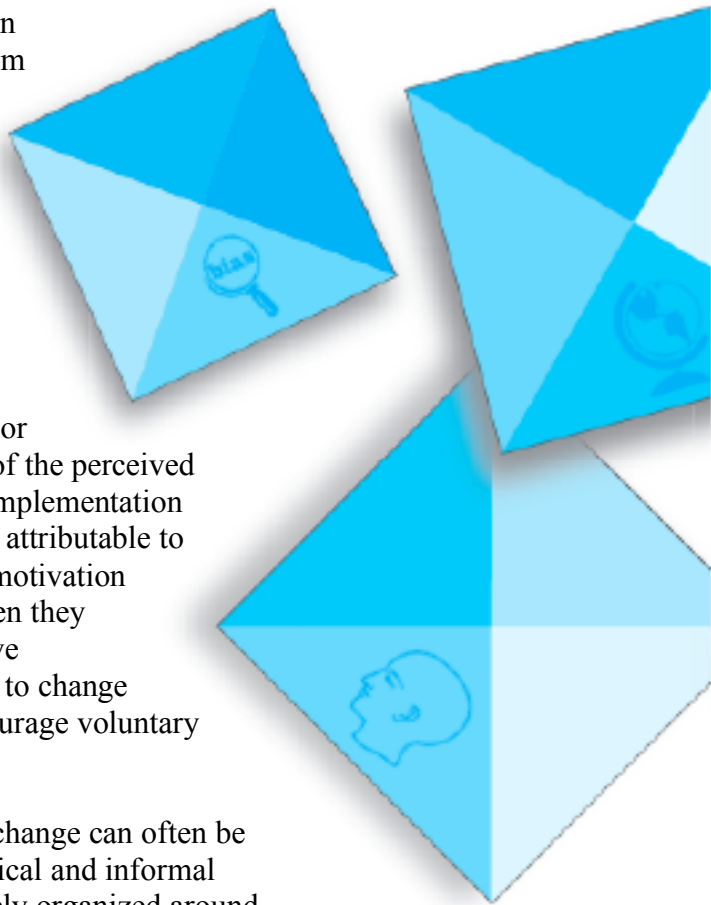
Professional Readings from tc²

Building Voluntary Teacher Networks

by Roland Case and Walt Werner

There exists an extensive literature on mandated changes that emanate from sanctioned decisions made at institutional hierarchies and teachers by means of coercive purpose is to understand the “implementation” difficulties with prescribed policies, programs, standards, assessment procedures, and learning materials (e.g., Fullan, 1991). Comparatively less literature focuses on non-mandated changes that teachers sponsor themselves or voluntarily accept because of the perceived benefits. The dismal record of mandated implementation efforts (e.g., Sarason, 1990) may be partly attributable to their non-voluntary nature. There is little motivation for teachers to examine their practices when they merely implementing directives from above (1990). The irony is that requiring teachers to change may be counterproductive. Efforts to encourage voluntary teacher renewal deserve greater attention.

The success and failure of non-mandated change can often be traced to the effectiveness of non-hierarchical and informal teacher networks. Such networks are loosely organized around negotiated agendas, consist of flexible and voluntary relationships across a shifting body of participants, and continue to exist only as long as they are seen to be of benefit. Innovative ideas are passed among participants throughout the network via oral communication and the sharing of published and unpublished materials. Through these exchanges, educators define problems, open classroom practices to one another, share potential solutions, and test new understandings.



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Our purpose is to explore key factors in the building of networks to support non-mandated instructional renewal. This search takes the point of view of those who initiate and sustain such networks, uses an example of a network for promoting critical thinking across the curriculum in the Canadian province of British Columbia, and concludes with a discussion of why, once mobilized, loosely organized and voluntary networks are difficult to sustain.

Background

Networking among classroom teachers and other educators for the purposes of developing and disseminating new classroom practices, and improving student learning, is not new across North America (Miles, 1977; Sarason et al., 1977; Cusick, 1981; McLaughlin & Marsh, 1990). The rationale underlying these earlier attempts was that networking liberated members from the restraints of local context, giving them access to a greater variety of people and resources. During the 1980s, though, large-scale government sponsored networks largely fell into disfavor as expensive and unfocused, and were on the whole disappointing in terms of significant impact on teachers' instructional practices (Elmore & Sykes, 1992). More recently, educators and researchers have realized anew that the changing conditions of teaching and learning in schools urgently require the expertise and commitment of a variety of players (Rosenholtz, 1989; Fullan, 1999), and so longer-term consortia have emerged under the banner of educational reform (Sirotnik & Goodlad 1988; Winitzky et al., 1992; Fullan, 1993; Goodlad, 1994; Grossman, 1994; McQuillan & Muncey, 1994; Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997). The underlying belief, as Fullan states, is that "Partnerships are essential since no one

group can make a difference on its own" (1993, p. 131).

Although the current reform literature extols the benefits of alliances, it provides little analysis of network construction from the stance of the network builders. According to Lieberman and Grolnick, "little has been written about how such networks are formed, what they focus on, and how they are sustained. . . . leadership may be one of the least studied aspects of networks" (1997, pp. 193, 201). This lack can be addressed in part by Actor Network Theory that defines networks through the actions of those who construct them (Callon, 1986; Latour, 1987, 1997). This approach accounts for networks in terms of the actions of the builders, rather than from the god's-eye view of general systems theory. It treats networks neither as reified 'things' within which people work nor as having any existence apart from what people actually do. According to Latour,

there is not a net and an actor laying down the net, but there is an actor whose definition of the world outlines, traces, delineates, . . . a trajectory that is called a network. No net exists independently of the very act of tracing it, and no tracing is done by an actor exterior to the net. (1997, p. 13)

Networks exist solely by virtue of two categories of activity: network building and network participation.¹ Network building is here defined as those activities that initiate and support relationships among participants, under the umbrella of a particular classroom renewal discourse. Network participation is defined as those activities where the professional discourse is engaged—where the knowledge, language and practice is actually produced and shared

within these relationships which are themselves shaped in and by the discourse. By these accounts, organizing a teachers' conference or publishing a professional resource are network building activities; presenting or attending a workshop and authoring or reading resource materials are network participation activities. Networks remain fluid without compulsory pathways and elements, as ongoing arrangements defined through interactions among participants facilitated by builders. The point of network analysis is to describe the formation of these associations, and how agendas are translated into actions by means of network construction. Callon argues that "translation is a process, never a completed assignment" (1986, p. 196), and that its success or failure can be accounted for in terms of the particular actions taken at various stages of network construction.

During the 1990s, a number of networks promoted classroom renewal across the Canadian province of British Columbia.² One that quickly came to prominence was a network organized around a model of critical thinking adopted by The Critical Thinking Cooperative (TC²)— an association of school districts, teacher professional associations, and faculties of education. For decades the term "critical thinking" was taken for granted as part of the educational discourse within provincial schools. Although it was a stated curriculum goal, implementation proceeded on broken fronts across schools, districts, and teacher education institutions. Conceptions of critical thinking and teaching approaches varied widely, many of which were vaguely understood or based on dubious assumptions (Bailin et al., 1999a), and assessments of student reasoning in various subject areas consistently demonstrated considerable weakness (e.g., Bognar et al., 1991; 1996). By 1993, dissatisfaction across many BC

educational groups concerning the teaching of critical thinking gave rise to a belief that the time had come to promote the goal more explicitly and systematically. Under the encouragement of the Ministry of Education, four local education professors developed with teachers a user-friendly conception of critical thinking that could be used across curriculum documents, assessment practices, and teacher development (Bailin et al., 1993; 1999b).

In 1994, creators of the conception along with a handful of senior district administrators and post-secondary educators initiated TC² to promote critical thinking in BC schools. For the first five years of operation (1995-2000), TC² consisted of approximately a dozen institutional members.³ This formal association provided an organizational base for sponsoring varied professional development initiatives (e.g., school-based workshops, summer institutes, conferences, academic colloquia, and university credit courses); developing exemplary curriculum and professional development materials; lobbying the government for better curriculum policies; raising funds; and promoting research agendas.⁴ Most significantly, out of these activities has grown a large informal network of teachers. Since its inception, one quarter (about 9,000) of the province's teachers and pre-service teachers have participated in one or more of the 300-plus TC² sponsored professional development opportunities; in excess of 5,000 educators have purchased curriculum materials published by TC²; and several hundred teachers have contributed lesson and unit plans, articles, and other professional resources for sharing across the network.

The mobilizing of teachers into an informal network around the TC² model of critical thinking is the focus of this article. One of

the authors has been a participant-observer in a range of these activities and the other is a principal builder of the TC² network. We postulate a number of factors that contribute to network growth and discuss each in the context of the TC² experience.

Factors

The central task of network builders is to mobilize and enroll others in a renewal project. But what does this entail? In our experience, the following factors shape the emergence of these loosely organized affiliations: (1) the starting point lies in identifying and framing an engaging idea—an idea that meets a *perceived need*, has *conceptual and practical clarity*, is *inclusive* and has *generative potential*; (2) the enabling conditions consist of rich *exemplars*, credible *advocates*, diverse *incentives*, and responsive *leadership*; and (3) the primary focus is on professional development centered around engendering *informed, reflective discourse* about the innovation and its implications for teacher practice. Although the life of a network resides in its engaging idea, this needs to be carried and maintained by means of exemplars, advocates, incentives, and leadership in order for teacher development to be realized. These considerations guide choices and actions taken by network builders to gain support for their agendas (Callon, 1986, p. 203). The point is to build a web of relationships that will hold over a sufficient period of time so as to make a material difference in classrooms. If successful, the builders create alliances around a set of ideas that teachers come to accept, understand and implement rather than discard.

The Starting Point: An Engaging Idea

At the heart of any network, note Lieberman and Grolnick, are ideas that attract broad interest and commitment:

Ideas build . . . interest and participation—ideas that are themselves transformed by the participants and feed back into the network. . . . In this expanding process, people become committed to one another as well as to larger ideas and ideals that expand their world and their work. (1997, p. 199)

While it may be arguable whether or not mandated change efforts can succeed without an engaging idea, there simply is no voluntary network building without a central idea providing the motivation and glue. A project's central idea has to capture the interest of more than a few advocates if expanded relationships are to develop. But what makes an idea compelling to teachers?⁵ As suggested above, the ability to attract large numbers of teachers to voluntarily and actively support an idea over a sustained period depends on four conditions: perceived need, conceptual and practical clarity, inclusive application, and generative potential.

Perceived need. The most obvious criterion for an engaging idea is that the idea motivates teachers to join together around the change initiative. To do this, the idea must speak to the instructional concerns recognized by teachers themselves, and have the power to focus and integrate their specific concerns around a realistic vision of what a project could accomplish and how they would benefit. Unless teachers see the innovation as necessary or highly desirable, few are likely to bother with it. The first task

of builders, then, is to frame an engaging cause for enrolling and motivating participants. The challenge in doing so is to define a proposed change in a way that appeals to potential members, and has the strength to link them voluntarily in common cause. Callon (1986) refers to this as the “problematization” task in which potential participants come to recognize compelling reasons for joining together in a larger project. Over time this initial problematization becomes tested and further fine-tuned as problems are clarified, conditions for involvement are negotiated, and mutually acceptable relationships are forged to better fit participants’ ongoing concerns.

In the case of critical thinking network, teachers readily agreed that there was a very real need for learning more about infusing critical thinking into their teaching. Because critical thinking was seen as alternative to the dry transmission of information, it spoke directly to teachers’ desires to enhance student interest, motivation, and thoughtfulness. The proposed model was especially attractive to teachers because the builders stressed the integration of critical thinking with the teaching of subject matter, thereby helping teachers see that they could improve students’ understanding of the content while promoting their abilities to think for themselves.

Clarity. It is not sufficient in building a sustained network that an idea attracts considerable teacher interest. Educational slogans are attractive ideas but they do not lead to concerted, productive activity. Slogans are vaguely defined and variously understood ideas that arouse interest but typically provide no direction for educational change. Slogans such as “global education” or “curriculum integration” typically evoke more heat than light.⁶ The

ambiguity of a slogan often means that individuals interpret the idea in incompatible even contradictory ways. An effective network is unlikely when there is only the illusion of a common focus among the participants.

An idea with some degree of conceptual and practical clarity implies exclusiveness, unlike vague slogans that encourage wide-ranging and loose interpretations. Undefined ideas provide little purchase or capacity for classroom renewal. As mentioned earlier, critical thinking discourses consisted of conflicting arguments, conceptions, and practices. Critical thinking was potentially merely a slogan. The builder’s initial task, therefore, was to privilege a clear conception and encourage educators to support it over others. The founding premise of the Cooperative was that its members would adopt a particular conception of critical thinking—what came eventually to be called the TC² model. It was clear and focused enough to provide direction, thereby excluding conflicting and potentially distracting literatures and practices. Without a clearly defined idea, a network quickly loses coherence.

Conceptual clarity is not enough—an engaging idea must also have practical clarity. It must help teachers see the implications for their own teaching. Unlike much of the literature on critical thinking that speaks primarily to debates among academics and is perceived by teachers to have little application in their classrooms, the TC² model was offered as a “pedagogical” conception—a conception articulated from the perspective of what teachers would need to consider in promoting critical thinking in their classrooms. Rather than a list of idealized abilities and dispositions, the TC² model conceptualized critical thinking in terms of

four challenges facing teachers: (1) fostering classroom and school communities that nurture thoughtfulness, (2) making problematic the content of the curriculum by creating tasks or questions that invite students to make reasoned judgments, (3) supporting student acquisition of the intellectual resources or “tools” needed to construct thoughtful responses to the critical challenge, and (4) assessing students’ mastery of the requisite tools.

Inclusiveness. Somewhat paradoxically, an engaging idea must be both exclusive and sufficiently inclusive so as to allow for diversity among teachers and teaching contexts. If an idea does not allow for wide application across subject areas, student groups, grade levels, teaching styles and levels of expertise, then too few teachers will find opportunities to engage with it. Highly prescription models, involving fixed or narrowly defined procedures, are likely to appeal to small teacher audiences.

The TC² model allowed teachers to focus on one or more of the four key areas and within each there was sufficient latitude to allow for application in any subject with students from kindergarten to graduate school. In addition, relatively simple entry points accommodated teachers who were new to critical thinking while the complex layers of the model engaged expert teachers.

Generative potential. A final factor—one especially significant for sustaining networks—is the generative potential of engaging ideas. An inclusive idea can be applied by a broad range of teachers; an idea is generative if it is if its application for each teacher is significant or transformative. Ideas are generative in at least two interrelated ways: they inspire teachers to reconceptualize basic assumptions of their practice, and/or they incite powerful ripple

effects across a breadth of teaching behaviours. Ideas with non-generative potential tend to be superficial and localized. For example, prior to working with the TC² model, one school staff sought to enhance student thinking through use of graphic organizers. Graphic organizers refer to the use of a variety of charts, diagrams, and schemata to encourage students to represent ideas visually. After months of working with this innovation, most of the staff had successfully integrated it into their teaching. But the effect was not transformative: graphic organizers aided student in comprehending and representing ideas, but they did not significantly improve students’ thinking ability, alter the nature of what was learned and how it was assessed, or reconfigure students’ relationships with the teacher or with the content of the curriculum. Some of the staff remarked that graphics organizers were useful, but that not much had changed. Not surprising, the staff looked for a focus that would have a more pervasive effect on their teaching.

The generative potential of the TC² model was considerable. Many teachers came to see that promoting critical thinking had widespread and fundamental effects on many aspects of their teaching including the questions and assignments posed in class, assessment practices, depth of curriculum content covered, and student onus for learning.

Some Enabling Conditions: Exemplars, Advocates, Incentives, Organization

Although engaging ideas are the starting point in attracting teachers, they need to be carried through rich exemplars and by credible advocates and supported with varied incentives and responsive leadership if the outcome of teacher development is to be realized.

Rich Exemplars. A large part of what makes an idea engaging is that it is conveyed through rich exemplars—such as teaching resources and classroom stories—that demonstrate its potential across subject areas and grade levels. They embody the idea, providing teachers with a concrete basis for interpreting its potential (Ben-Peretz, 1990). Effective exemplars *exemplify*—they illustrate particular features or dimensions of the idea—and are *exemplary*—they capture stellar or remarkable performance. This is not to say that exemplars must be “razzle-dazzle” lessons. On the contrary, the most compelling exemplars often reveal the achievements of ordinary teachers working under typical conditions without expending heroic efforts. Consider two exemplars used widely with the TC² network. The story of a teacher who turned around flagging interest in a social studies unit by asking students to come up with their own thoughtful opinions rather than merely feeding them facts to absorb illustrated how critical thinking could effortlessly integrate with teaching content in a way that was both motivational and engendered greater understanding. The sample lesson of the primary students who were taught to ask powerful questions of a classroom guest exemplified the role of teaching the “tools” in empowering even very young students to think through a task.

Throughout the TC² project, teachers were recruited to develop exemplary classroom materials. Many of these materials were published and used to introduce teachers more broadly to the conception and practice of critical thinking during school-based professional development; those who used the ideas were then asked at subsequent meetings to share their experiences with the group. Their classroom stories of difficulties and successes further illustrated and clarified the conception, and helped to

enhance its believability. An ongoing and fresh pool of practical exemplars was ensured as teachers came on board and turned their experiences into materials and stories.

Exemplars proved to be a powerful way to attract the interest and commitment of teachers at large. This made the conception accessible and credible by showing what it looked like, and was crucial to the building of the informal network. The role of exemplars in nudging instructional change needs far more critical analysis than it has received to date in the literature.

Credible Advocates. A few individuals do not single-handedly create geographically spread networks. They cannot personally mobilize participants across hundreds of schools. Success depends upon spreading leadership to an enlarged set of advocates who can in turn work within their own constituencies, and so encourage new relationships around the central compelling idea. The expectation is that these advocates become network builders within their specific localities. In this respect a successful network often begins with a central core and expands over time through creation of hubs of network activity sparked by local advocacy.

To some extent, growth in the number of advocates is inevitable: as more participants are brought into a network, more of them are motivated to share their ideas with others. However, if a network is to expand, the nurturing of credible advocacy has to be ongoing to meet increasing demand and replace those who lose commitment due to the daily press of other things. Selecting, training and supporting credible advocates involve considerable uncertainty. Their initial selection is always a gamble: Will they speak to the interests of those whom

they claim to represent? And will they be able to mobilize their colleagues? Making the right bet is key for network success. Even if they have special status within their institutions, potential advocates may not have the credibility (knowledge, trustworthiness, and competence) or the influence (ability to energize and enable) necessary to attract other participants (Ramsay, 1994). And they have to be convinced that it is beneficial to weaken links with other projects that may compete for time and resources; in other words, their enrollment is a double movement in which commitment to the innovation also involves a weakening of relationships with competing conceptions (Callon, 1986, p. 207).

In the TC² context, individuals from three different groups were identified as potential advocates who could draw participants into the larger network. The more important group consisted of classroom teachers who already were recognized leaders within their schools or subject areas, such as department heads and respected teachers. Builders invested considerable time with these individuals because they could promote the conception and encourage colleagues to engage it in their classrooms. A second group were non-classroom educators selected from partner organizations such as the teachers' union, ministry of education, university faculties of education, curriculum specialist groups (e.g., social studies, English, science), and school district administrators; their involvement provided the builders with increased legitimacy, access to a greater number of teachers, and funding for network organizing activities. Internationally known experts in critical thinking were also asked to endorse and lend prestige to the project; this was thought to be necessary given the competing conceptions of critical thinking represented in the literature and in practice.

The task for these advocates was to re-problematize the idea and encourage broader enrollment. If the project was to realize classroom change, they had to mobilize the support of their constituencies. Although activities took many forms—such as school-based workshops, curriculum materials development sessions, small study groups, summer institutes, and conference presentations—the purposes were the same: to make the critical thinking conception compelling, and to develop a vision of what a collaborative project could accomplish and how members would benefit.

Diverse Incentives. Credible advocacy is just part of keeping a network going. Broader mobilization depends upon acceptable incentives; teachers more widely need to see that there are benefits for them as well. An underlying principle of networking is that partners join in a common purpose for their mutual benefit. Potential members are those who recognize that individual and collective interests are best pursued through joint efforts, that their goals are blocked by obstacles—such as a lack of resources (e.g., time, energy, expertise, or strategies)—which can more easily be overcome through a system of association (House, 1974, 1996; Callon, 1986, p. 206). The link that draws and holds them to the network is that their own benefits are served, whether for ideas, inspiration, resources, collegiality, renewed classrooms, or whatever. Both network participants and builders need to see the benefits, and these incentives must be varied to serve different motives. As House (1996) suggests, informal networks depend upon encouraging “opportunism”—giving room for various agendas to be served without losing focus on the common goal. Builders must frame the activities of the network in ways that allow for diverse interests to be

addressed through the collective pursuit of a common vision.

An initial incentive among the core TC² network builders was the perceived relevance of the idea itself, the cost effectiveness of collaborative effort and the need for a sustained presence. These educators agreed that critical thinking needed to be strengthened across the curriculum in pedagogically rich ways, and wanted to push beyond current practice. But they also realized that they did not have the expertise or teaching materials to do it alone, and therefore needed to benefit from a broader base of experience and strength. Networking became attractive because each one could obtain more quickly what he or she wanted by joining together. As Fullan (1993, p. 17) observed, “There is a ceiling effect to how much we can learn [or accomplish] if we keep to ourselves.” In particular, teachers and administrators were attracted by the promise of classroom friendly materials and possibilities for school or district-wide professional development. They were not asked to implement someone else’s program, but encouraged to use the tools—the conception of critical thinking, exemplary materials, training sessions, and sources of expertise—for pursuing their own starting points for improvement.

Some network builders had agendas to be served in addition to the goals of the network. For example, by promoting the network through their organization’s journal and conferences, the leadership of the provincial social studies association saw opportunities to enhance visibility and build credibility with their broader teacher constituency, increase membership numbers, and gain access to university expertise for other long-term professional development initiatives. They also believed that becoming

one of the supporters of the project could confer advantage in arguments with the government over the shape of new curriculum policies.

The incentives for network participants are easily as important and as diverse as those for network builders. Teachers were encouraged to attend initial professional development sessions with the promise of materials (sponsoring groups often purchased published materials to be distributed free to teachers who attended sessions) and an abundance of readily usable ideas. Incentives for follow-up or more sustained professional development included course credit and the promise of significance changes in classroom performance. Incentives for teachers to lead workshops and create resources included professional growth, province-wide visibility through authorship of published materials, financial compensation and prospects for advancement.

By recognizing the central role of incentives within an informal network, the builders broadened the audience for their conception of critical thinking, and made their own expertise attractive. They were the ones who understood the subtleties and implications of the conception, and had access to relevant resources of people, materials, and ideas. Educators could not realize benefits without accessing this specialized knowledge, and the builders could not attain their goals without a growing network. This implied the need to become allies.

Responsive leadership. Widespread associations do not spontaneously arise and succeed over time without strong leadership keeping the cause visible and expanding the membership. A core groups of network builders do this by continuously re-articulating the vision in a way that has new

and broad appeal, recruiting and supporting the activities of advocates, fostering conditions that encourage teacher discussion and development, and ensuring that the compelling idea maintains its integrity when reinterpreted within local contexts.⁷

“Seeking talent and putting it to work, taking advantage of serendipitous happenings, and mixing and matching are the strengths of those who coordinate these networks” (Lieberman & Grolnick, 1997, p. 201), and this is especially true for the kind of network discussed here.

Leadership must be thought of strategically: what is the right kind and amount of direction at this time and place to keep the central idea focused and to accommodate the emerging needs of participants? Unless the leadership is open to the developing interests and concerns of members, networks lose momentum and fade away. In the TC² experience, there was a shifting back and forth along a continuum of centralized/decentralized decision-making and planning. Both were necessary. Although the builders’ actions were the basis for leadership during the early stage, this was not the traditional “center-periphery” model in which innovations are linearly sponsored and disseminated outward from source to ‘consumer.’ Rather, the network was encouraged to grow through localized hubs of activity where participants would translate the idea within their contexts, and work cooperatively with other groups of participants in supporting each other’s efforts.

Responsive leadership uses existing networks to advantage. One consideration in enrolling advocates is to select key actors in other networks. The subject matter specialist teacher associations, for example, not only sponsored their own journals, newsletters, conferences and workshops, but also were

viewed by members as sources and legitimizers of new ideas. As these leaders were enrolled, access opened to established communication channels and venues for broader enrollment activities within their own constituency using their own infrastructure. Elmore and Sykes (1992) note that the logic of this “periphery-periphery” approach to decisions and classroom change

proceeds by induction—locating many exemplary instances, then creating connections among units so that good practices may be shared laterally, rather than from the center outward. The strategy appropriate to this conception is networking—putting individual units in touch with one another for the mutual sharing of knowledge, support, and other resources. Practitioners are identified as the source of ideas about curriculum, and they share these ideas with other practitioners. There is no assumption here that ideas in good currency emanate only from elite sources such as government agencies or universities. (p. 201)

However, the danger was that the complexity and richness of critical thinking become trivialized over time. Some centralizing actions were therefore necessary, and so the builders continued to select, edit and distribute teacher-developed exemplars in order to ensure that the original conception remained visible and compelling across the network. In this way they acted as ongoing promoters and gatekeepers for the idea rather than risk its loss.

The Primary Focus: *Professional Development*

The focus of a teacher network must be professional development of a particular type—involving teachers in informed, critical conversation and reflection about their practice. This was the method for achieving the goal of non-mandated instructional renewal, and its criterion of success. Change occurred as teachers thought and talked about the importance and usefulness of the conception, and as their capacities to translate it within classrooms were enhanced. Creation of a large number of materials and widespread provision of workshops were not the ends in view so much as the means for attracting teacher interest, initiating thoughtful engagement with the conception, and facilitating the re-evaluation and re-planning of instructional practices.⁸ As Goodlad notes,

the network is akin to a collection of trails to expedite the movement of ideas and examples. It is what goes on in the settings themselves that counts. When the game becomes primarily one of drawing more attention to the trails and trailside attractions, things quickly go awry.
(Goodlad, 1994, p. 636)

A problem-solving approach through collegial discussion proved to be a good way to initiate voluntary relationships while making the engaging idea more immediately relevant. For example, in small groups teachers were encouraged to explore how the critical thinking conception could be used to strengthen a current lesson plan, instructional strategy, or student project. Each one developed a plan of action and committed to doing something over the next few days. During a follow-up session, they

debriefed what was attempted, problem-solved the difficulties encountered, and received peer critiques and affirmation. This simple collaborative approach to teacher development—consisting of ongoing (1) planning, (2) experimenting, and (3) critiquing—was intended to be cyclical rather than episodic, and worked because it was participatory, classroom-based, and gave ownership to participants. Those who entered the process commented on the relevance and benefit of focused, in-depth, informed and sustained discussion of current teaching activities in the light of critical thinking, and how infrequent such discussions were within schools. Successful change depended upon opportunities for exchanging ideas, opening practices to one another, testing new understandings, receiving supportive feedback, and committing to further collegial work around an engaging idea.

A loss of focus on teacher development is an obstacle to network continuation. There is little incentive for them to continue if they don't see their concerns addressed, or believe that another group's interests (e.g., administrators, or university researchers) are dominating. There has to be concrete demonstration from the beginning that teachers are the valued audience and that their development is the primary long-term goal rather than curriculum materials or academic research. The role of leadership is to keep this focus visible through utilizing the experiential knowledge and expertise of teacher advocates, promoting teacher-produced resources, celebrating the achievements of members, and minimizing the reliance on outside experts.

Discussion

Non-mandated renewal can be initiated and encouraged through loosely organized,

emerging, and informal networks; however, it is difficult to keep them going. Growth (and even survival) past the short-term is often vulnerable. They quickly crash or quietly fade for reasons already discussed.

Voluntary participation and decentralized relationships work against longevity. People come and leave as they wish for various reasons. Teachers who were not captivated by the idea after an initial introduction, or felt that its promised benefits were not worth the perceived costs—such as the time, energy, and uncertainties involved in collaborating with others—did not participate further. Others were willing to explore critical thinking through discussion groups and readings, but came to realize that implementation would be more complex than anticipated. Their objections spoke to a perceived mismatch between the conception and their own assumed epistemology, preferred classroom roles, uses of textbooks and assessment, and assumptions regarding subject matter, and showed that they were unwilling to commit to its implications for their teaching. In short, the central idea was not sufficiently inclusive or clear.

Even where the idea is initially engaging, inertia becomes a threat over the longer term because of competing priorities and contextual factors. Voluntary relationships only last so long as the central idea remains important; once it fades, so do the linkages among teachers. With no formal compulsion to maintain communication, the real test comes after participants' initial curiosity and sense of urgency wane in the context of other engaging ideas, multiple networks, and the grind of daily routines. Network visibility inevitably declines when new materials and workshops are not forthcoming. Then the tough challenge for advocates is to keep participants' attention and commitments going until the desired

renewal becomes rooted. Lieberman and Grolnick rightly observe that “no matter what the purposes of the network, activities have to be compelling enough to keep people coming back for more” (1997, p. 204). Goodlad similarly notes that “there must be encouragement, support in the form of new resources, the sharing of experiences, and drummers to sustain the march when energies flag” (1994, p. 638). Relationships can dissipate over the course of a few months if new directions, resources or ideas are not interjected into the project. Sustaining involvement and momentum requires ongoing re-problematization and re-mobilization.

Loose networks are also vulnerable to institutional, political, and sundry contextual factors beyond the control of their builders. Ongoing policy changes on the part of provincial or district authorities, for instance, create new priorities and uncertainties for teachers, sometimes with unanticipated consequences for a network (such as a loss of focus, enthusiasm, and commitment). Another factor is the difficulty of maintaining long-term collaborative relationships within the individualistic cultures of many schools; busy teachers often find independent work to be more time efficient in dealing with the realities of the workplace, and are willing to discuss their work and share ideas with colleagues in a sustained way only if the school makes time available (Hargreaves, 1994). Further, as decentralized networks expand across schools, districts, and geographical regions, their agendas and identities become fragmented. Growth and time favor localized relationships, encourage the pursuit of multiple projects, and thereby weaken members' identification with larger alliances. While diversity optimizes local relevancies, the danger is that a network no longer serves common purposes.

Within a loosely knit alliance, accountability norms are weak for ensuring that the goals are served. Members voluntarily enter into relations based on their own classroom needs, agendas, and levels of commitment, and their diverse assumptions and exceptions easily give rise to misunderstandings and frustrations over the direction and pace of progress. For example, participants who seriously use the ideas discussed at meetings soon find that they have little in common with those who have done very little. Tensions over whose interests are being served surface in subsequent meetings between those who want to move quickly and those who feel they are being left behind. Less active participants do benefit from their chosen level of involvement—some deliberately take a “wait-and-see” approach in order to learn from the work and mistakes of their colleagues before committing greater levels of time and energy—but their level of involvement may be judged as inadequate by more active colleagues. The consequence is a splintering of a network into groups that pull in different directions.

Despite the many things that work against voluntary networks, they may be no less transitory than mandated initiatives. More importantly, we think, they offer as much or more possibility of success, if for no other reason than the implied respect for teachers. Underlying voluntary network building is a commitment to the principle that each individual comes with expertise to contribute, agendas to serve, contextual relevancies to satisfy, and obligations to fulfill. The hard work for builders is to make this principle work. The variety of experiences, richness of viewpoints and expertise, and interplay of ideas that teachers bring into a network have to be

constantly valued and channeled into a shared agenda for improving classrooms.

¹ A “network” without activity is a shell; it is not a de facto network.

² These networks arose around themes such as writing across the curriculum, curriculum integration, global education, citizenship education, internet use in classrooms, technology enhanced secondary science instruction, historical reasoning, and critical thinking (e.g., Werner, 1991; Case & Werner, 1997). Currently the Ministry of Education has a major funding project entitled “Networks for Teacher Development in Social Studies” (Ministry, 1999a, 1999b); this project rejects ‘top-down’ mandated standards for improving social studies in schools in favor of the following two principles: (1) collaborative, ongoing, and long-term teacher development lies at the core of improving social studies; (2) revitalization must make teachers the central participants in change, capitalize on the current strengths of social studies classrooms, and utilize the energies of various groups who make up the broader social studies community.

³ Our analysis is limited to TC² network building activities until 2000. For the period 2000 through 2003, TC² has Ministry of Education funding to engage thousands of the province’s social studies teachers in extensive professional development and networking activities. Because of this upcoming initiative, institutional membership in TC² has doubled.

⁴ Some start-up funding came from the provincial ministry of education, but after this initial-kick the ministry no longer provided resources nor joined the cooperative, and so funding then came from the institutional partners, the production and sale of curriculum materials, and organization of workshops, summer institutes and courses.

⁵ Characteristics of an innovative idea that make it compelling are discussed by Doyle and Ponder (1978), Ben-Peretz (1990, p. 45), Fullan (1991, pp. 69-73), Perkins (1992), and Hargreaves (1994, p. 12).

⁶ Case (1994) discusses the lack of conceptual and practical clarity provided by the slogan “curriculum integration.”

⁷ The multiple roles of builders include those of promoting the idea, attracting and training advocates, connecting individuals and groups with one another, cheerleading the work of resource developers (providing support and critical feedback), and taking care of the many ongoing organizational details. However, the high costs of these multiple roles explain why loosely organized networks tend to remain small. Maintaining a growing informal

network requires considerable time investments. Few individuals, especially among busy educators, have the necessary time, clear vision, and determined drive to initiate voluntary associations and then keep them going over the longer term. Successful builders often need another role—such as that of a school or district administrator, a teacher union curriculum consultant, or a university professor—with access to some resources that allows for more flexible time.

⁸ Within the Canadian context, network success is commonly judged on the number of materials produced, workshops offered, and teachers who attended events. The quality and extent of teacher development is a more difficult criterion on which to show evidence of success.

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