

Chapter XXXVIII

An Evaluation of ‘Linking for a Change’

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ABSTRACT

This chapter details one project, “Linking for a Change” (LFC), connecting schools and public/social sector providers of education for sustainable (ESD) across eight counties in the South West of England, with the objective of promoting the DfES “sustainable schools” action plan. It presents a discourse regarding the need for new education linkages/networks to emerge in order to enable education systems to evolve in response to the challenges of unsustainable development. A snapshot of ESD, or baseline data set is analysed from 66 schools and 85 ESD providers, leading into an exploration of the extent of the resulting electronic networking, or “e-networking” and its ability to enable cross-sector collaboration. Thus this research questions the fundamental premise behind much networking, using a tested methodology (Kershaw, 2004, 2006) to question the assumption that e-networking results either in change in practice or in increased capacity, that is, that “Linking” leads to change.

INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVES

The Purpose of the Project

The purpose of Linking for a Change resides in the need for the South West of England to support the development of sustainable schools across the region as part of the UK’s “Year of Action for

Sustainable Schools.” A regional steering group, drawn together around the project aims from a broader coalition for sustainability, created a Web site connecting ESD providers with education establishments for the purpose of information exchange and collaboration, aiming to provide long term support to schools through to 2020. The primary purpose of this research is to draw,

or tease out causal relationships and to identify any sector specific ESD actions and responses along with their corresponding support needs, within the data set. The secondary purpose is to generate an overview of the current status of ESD within the sample population against which change can be measured, while an implicit objective within both project and research is to support and instigate both changes in practice and the generation of new educational practice. Thus, the research objectives augment and extend those of the "LFC" project in which the data collection aimed to promote collaboration across education and service providers drawn from local government, the charity and private sectors. By archiving that information electronically and enabling the database to be searched by postcode or key words the project highlights mutual areas of both practice and lack of practice between the schools and the ESD providers.

The Process of "Linking for a Change"

The time from instigation through to dissemination was around one year, and the whole process was consultative across a steering group, providing an equal voice across the region, but not necessarily across sectors. According to an earlier case study of a local inter-organisational network (Kershaw, M 2004), "networks exist to promote collaboration and co-operation, avoiding information control"; while participating organisations have both individual and collective goals. Linking for a Change can only be called a network if there is a body of information exchanged (Thorelli, 1986) and the survey, circulated in paper format, was in most instances supported by either a face to face interview or a telephone conversation so putting the survey into the context of the regional and national education drivers of change in order to ensure maximum validity of response and maximum potential for collaboration against minimal demand on the respondent.

Stages One – Four

Four stages of the project are already completed: project inception, survey preparation, data collection and Web site construction. The fifth stage, Web site use or collaboration is underway with users currently being given access to the site though their own personal password. In devising the project it was assumed from the start that initial contact would be made electronically, and that the matching of priorities between schools and service providers would engender an exchange of information that is, "e-networking." In the context of this project, "e networking" is defined as "information exchange arising as a result of electronic communication." The exchange will, no doubt, be carried out by a range of mechanisms: electronic, postal, face to face and verbal communication, it is the electronic instigation of the exchange which defines it as "e-networking." The collaborative element arises from the individual aims of the participating organisations, coming together to find joint solutions, to share practice and to generate new practice as an educational response to sustainable development. This is the basic premise behind the national and international construction of ESD networks, as unpicked within this research; that the complexities of learning for sustainable development require new interfaces between structures of education and learning and that these new networks and learning platforms will help to bring about the change so urgently needed in society. The creation of new interfaces, between education and society, are one inevitable outcome of the global increase of "e-learning" in the developing world; for example in China where development of teacher training for over one million of the millions of poorly trained or untrained teachers, often in rural locations, is being tackled through distance learning, with the objective of poverty alleviation (Crichton et al., 2004). Other countries, such as Uganda, are taking their telecommunications to the next level through liberalising telecommunication systems

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