



Aporia Consulting Ltd.

Northeast Region PNC Research Priorities and Process Session Report

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This report provides a summary of the session conducted on September 14, 2006 to support the development of research in the North East Region MISA PNC. The session was a follow-up to the suggestion identified in the first report that a priority area was required for the PNC to develop a common program of research that reflects the common needs of the membership.

The session consisted of a number of processes where the group worked to identify a common focus that would relate to their district interests. In addition, key research findings from Aporia's examination of network learning communities were presented as they related to the current needs, interests, and direction of the North East PNC. The session agenda is presented in Appendix A.

The report has three sections. First, a brief overview of the rationale for the approach is offered. Second, the process for identifying the PNC focus is described. Finally, the next steps for supporting Assessment For Learning as a PNC focus are suggested.

Key Features For A Learning Network PNC

The PNC has been working together for one year and in the last report we determined that there has been a warranted emphasis in attending to establishing a technological infrastructure. Over the last year, the boards and authorities in the North East PNC have developed relationships around sharing information and decisions regarding the data warehousing software provider. This endeavour has created opportunities for collaborative relationships to develop, which appears to have promoted a degree of collegiality amongst the PNC leadership group, who, for the most part met for the first time when individuals were introduced to the PNC.

The importance of these collegial relationships in making the PNC a learning network is noteworthy. During the course of the session, the group was introduced to the seven key features that make a network a learning network. These key features are part of a theory of action for networked learning communities based on an extensive review of the literature and the findings

from Phase 2 of an evaluation of networks Aporia completed in 2006 called *How Networked Learning Communities Work*¹.

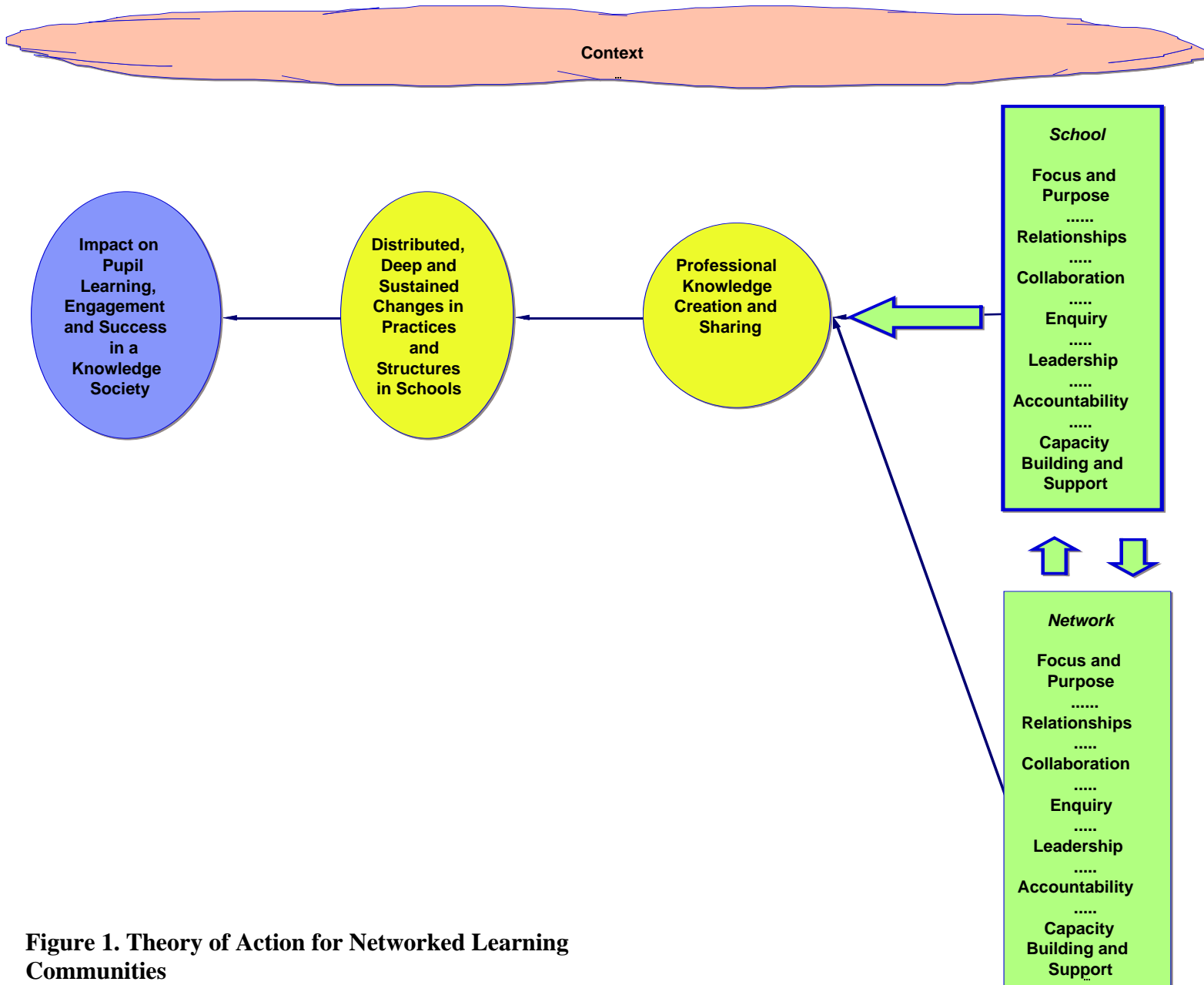


Figure 1. Theory of Action for Networked Learning Communities

¹ Earl, L.; Katz, S.; Elgie, S.; Ben Jaafar, S.; Foster, L. *How Networked Learning Communities Work*. (2006, May). Report prepared for the National College of School Leadership, London, UK.
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The theory of action represented in Figure 1 models the way in which networked learning communities are expected to operate in supporting student learning as an ultimate outcome. The model outlines a simple logical relationship between what happens in networked learning communities and the student learning. The premise is that student learning depends on changes in the practices and structures of schools that emerge from professional learning. In a learning network, this professional learning is promoted through the interactions within and across schools in the network

The theory of action (Figure 1) considers the end first. The intent of engaging in networked learning communities is to enhance student learning and student success. Changing pupil outcomes depends on changes in practice and structures in schools. The influence of networked learning is based on the idea that learning and the creation of new knowledge by teachers and administrative teams leads to deep conceptual changes and new ways of working in schools and classrooms. The seven key features of schools and networks that emerged from the literature as enablers expected to promote this kind of knowledge creation and sharing were:

1. Focus and purpose
2. Relationships
3. Collaboration
4. Enquiry
5. Leadership
6. Accountability
7. Capacity building and support

In Aporia's examination of the key features that served a high leverage function in promoting changes in schools in networks, focus and purpose proved essential. Given that the jurisdictions in the North East PNC were trying to build a learning network but did not yet have an explicit common focus, the September 14th session was primarily dedicated to identifying a suitable focus for the PNC.

Finding a Focus for the PNC

Having a fundamental and clear organizational purpose is critical to the success of professional learning communities and of a learning network. A useful focus is one that requires teachers to reconceptualize, unlearn or make changes to existing practice and structures, legitimating the change process, making the status quo more difficult to protect and offering opportunities for joint attention to issues that are larger than any one school could address. For a network focus to act as the adhesive element that merges the individual interests across the network into a collective interest, it requires certain characteristics. A good learning focus is:

- ✓ Concrete and useful
- ✓ High leverage in fostering student learning
- ✓ Compelling
- ✓ Challenging
- ✓ Shared
- ✓ Appropriate to the context of participating schools
- ✓ Based on evidence that it can have significant impact on teaching practices and student learning

The September 14th session was dedicated to identifying a focus that satisfied these criteria, whilst respecting the current priorities in each of the participating boards and authorities. In *How Network Learning Communities Work*, Aporia determined that both school and network focus were correlated with changes in thinking and practice, with a slightly higher relationship with the focus in networks. Schools were also shown to have a higher sense of attachment to the network when they reported a higher level of a focus that satisfied the criteria outlined above. Given these research findings, the North East PNC engaged in finding a collective focus.

Step 1. Board/Authority Priorities

Each board/authority representative completed the District Focus worksheet individually. The board/authority representatives worked within their own jurisdictional groups to consider first,

the board priority or priorities, second, to determine how the priority aligned with the criteria outlined in the table below, and third, what evidence did they have for their beliefs.

DISTRICT FOCUS		
What is the focus in your school district/authority?		
		How do you know that?
We have an explicit district/authorities focus	Y N	
District focus is linked to teaching and learning	Y N	
District focus is connected to student needs	Y N	
District focus is research based	Y N	
District focus is displayed for everyone to see	Y N	

Step 2. Sharing Board/Authority Priorities

Once the individual jurisdictions felt comfortable with their identification of priorities, each one shared their priorities and talked through the table of criteria with the group. We worked together, asking questions and clarifying answers. When a collective understanding of the priority was attained, it was captured on screen for the group. Once all of the district priorities were listed on screen, the group was introduced to the findings of the Aporia investigation of network learning communities regarding the important of focus.

Step 3. PNC Focus

The group was asked about their PNC focus. Drawing on their mission statement, the group identified 7 important foci that described their purpose:

1. Classroom level
2. Student level
3. Data literacy
4. Instructional practice
5. Culture
6. Student achievement
7. Context of Northeastern Ontario

In light of the initial variability in the district foci and the breadth of the PNC foci, we kept these group-identified points of emphasis on screen for later reference. In addition, we recognized that there was insufficient cohesion in the group regarding a common focus to complete the PNC Focus worksheet (below). Consequently, we worked to find a useful and pertinent focus.

PNC FOCUS		
What is your focus in the PNC?		
		How do you know that?
We have an explicit PNC focus	Y N	
School & network focus are closely related	Y N	
PNC focus is linked to teaching and learning	Y N	
PNC focus is connected to student needs	Y N	
PNC focus is research based	Y N	
PNC focus is displayed for everyone to see	Y N	
School & network focus are closely related	Y N	

Step 4. Common Interests and Direction

The board/authority foci were revisited and a split-screen was used to start organizing the priorities into groups that contained some kind of common conceptual descriptor. As the group engaged in grouping the board/authority priorities, they also engaged in further clarifications from each other and reworded priorities for increased accuracy, and identifying repetition.

The PNC leadership team created three groups that categorized the board/authority priorities. The list below presents the three categories with the board/authority priorities.

- 1) *To improve student achievement in a specific area* (e.g., literacy, numeracy, or graduation rates)
 - a. Using assessment & evaluation
 - b. Primary focus on literacy
 - c. Literacy at the primary junior level
 - d. Special needs and student success
 - e. Achieving 75% of students at provincial standard
- 2) *General assessment and evaluation*
 - a. To develop skills and capacity for improvement at the school and district level
 - b. Junior intermediate assessments struggle
 - c. Change instructional practices to improve student achievement based on our data
 - d. Finding tools and methods of assessment and evaluation in classrooms which identify successful techniques and pitfalls
- 3) *Assessment for learning* (classroom-based)
 - a. Building awareness, understanding, and comfort for using or learning to use evidence for improved instruction and achievement
 - b. Making assessment meaningful - (a process, not an outcome)
 - c. Providing tools and access to data for timely decisions for classroom level interventions
 - d. Instructional strategies, assessments, information to support student achievement
 - e. Finding tools to communicate learning successes and areas of improvement based on student achievement as valid reflections of in-classroom practices
 - f. Teacher understanding what are the possibilities for assessment tool/piece to move to instructional practice for student learning/achievement (rather than historic external direction on instructional approach)
 - g. Create a culture of appreciation and the practices in using data to shape instruction

Step 5. Choosing a PNC Focus

The group had a healthy discussion on deciding which of the three categories would serve as the best focus for the PNC. The group readily agreed that the General Assessment and Evaluation focus was too vague and would not provide sufficient parameters that narrow the scope to unite the individuals across the PNC. There was, however, a debate between selecting a specific area and making improving student achievement in that area, and assessment for

learning. After some discussion, and some input further defining assessment for learning from Aporia, the group determined that assessment for learning would be their focus. The rationale was that a specified increase in student achievement could be conceptualized as an ultimate outcome that could be supported through assessment for learning network activities. This focus would permit individuals within boards with a specific achievement priority to connect with the network through activities that emphasized related classroom practices.

As the assessment for learning focus was being determined, the group revisited the PNC points of emphasis identified from the mission statement (From Step 3). The group found that the assessment for learning focus did indeed capture all of the points including due consideration to the context of the Northeastern Ontario which permeates the system.

Next Steps

At the end of the session, the group articulated a need to learn more about assessment for learning to gain a shared understanding of the concept, and to learn more about related work in their boards/authorities. The PNC leadership team indicated that there was a need to become familiar with the concept of assessment for learning through readings, discussions, and/or inviting a speaker to work with the PNC to build a common understanding. There are a number of good resources that describe and illustrate the concept of assessment for learning. For example, Aporia Consulting Ltd. developed a supportive document for educators called *Classroom Assessment with Purpose in Mind* for the WNCP, who have made it publicly available at www.wncp.ca. This document was a supportive professional guide of assessment for learning based on the framework developed by Dr. Earl in her book *Assessment For, Of, and As Learning*.

The individuals in the PNC leadership team also indicated that it was important for them to become familiar with the work associated with assessment for learning that is occurring in their boards/authority and to report back the level of relevant activity to the group. Although it is important to build on the work that is already in process, the group may benefit from a formal process of information gathering and sharing that promotes making implicit knowledge explicit. There are several approaches to this process. I suggest that a research model be employed that

examines assessment for learning activity in the schools across the PNC. The information from the investigation can yield useful information on where to target common supports. For example, survey results about teachers reported classroom assessment practices and their professional development on assessment for learning would yield information that could be used to develop targeted common programs of learning across the PNC. Another example is using the results to identify an area of learning need in the PNC and connect several teachers across the network to implement a classroom assessment activity and engage in a participatory evaluation.

In moving forward with the assessment for learning focus, it is important that the PNC work towards establishing the connection with using evidence for decision making at the systemic level. The focus of the PNC builds in the opportunity for the collective understanding of using evidence to directly include the work of teachers. This opportunity has the potential to foster a change in culture where regularly collecting, analyzing, and using data for improving practice is common practice across the school system.



Appendix A

AGENDA

10:30 pm	Recap of Report
10:50 pm	District Focus
12:00 pm	The Importance of Focus: What our research tells us
12:15 pm	Lunch
1:00 pm	PNC Focus
1:45 pm	Network Inquiry: What our research tells us
2:05 pm	Break
2:20 pm	Inquiry and Research in the PNC
3:40 pm	Next Steps
4:00 pm	Close