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WHAT IS A NETWORKED IMPROVEMENT COMMUNITY?

A Networked Improvement Community (NIC) is an intentionally designed social organization with a distinctive problem-solving focus; roles, responsibilities, and norms for membership; and the maintenance of narratives that detail what it is about and why affiliating with it is important.[1]

A NIC brings together practitioners and researchers to accelerate learning about specific problems and to identify and adapt changes to local contexts. A NIC's work and learning is guided by six core principles of improvement science that shape how members define the problem to be solved and understand the system that produces it, engage in disciplined inquiry to identify, test and measure changes, and promote learning and scaling through the network.

WHAT ARE THE DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF A NIC?[2]

Networked improvement communities (NICs) are scientific learning communities distinguished by four essential characteristics:

FOCUSED ON A WELL SPECIFIED AIM

NICs share many attributes of professional communities (such as professional learning communities, communities of practice, etc.) in their best sense. One characteristic that distinguishes them from many is that while most such communities are what might be termed "communities of common interest or purpose" (shared interest amongst members who seek to learn from and with each other), NICs might be thought of as "communities of common accomplishment" (they seek to accomplish some clearly defined, measurable outcome).

GUIDED BY A DEEP UNDERSTANDING OF THE PROBLEM, THE SYSTEM THAT PRODUCES IT, AND A THEORY OF IMPROVEMENT RELEVANT TO IT

Too often efforts at improvement in education fall prey to what might be called "solutionitis[3]." Emphasis is placed upon the spread of programs that have been demonstrated to be effective, often without regard for a deep understanding of the problem or the context that defines it. NICs, by contrast, carefully study these things and articulate a theory of improvement thought to address them in the very terms that define them. Then the members of the NIC are in a position to evaluate possible solutions—choosing wisely, adapting appropriately, and inventing when invention is called for.

DISCIPLINED BY THE RIGOR OF IMPROVEMENT SCIENCE

Whereas traditional evaluative methodologies are designed to permit attribution so as to know "whether some program works," improvement science[4] provides an equally rigorous methodology for knowing "how to make a program work" reliably and across contexts.

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[1] Bryk, A.S., Gomez, L.M., Grunow, A., & LeMahieu, P.G. (2015). *Learning to Improve: How America's Schools Can Get Better at Getting Better.* Harvard Education Press, Cambridge, MA.
[2] Four characteristics excerpted from Carnegie Foundation blog "Why a NIC?" by Paul LeMahieu, August 18, 2015. www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/why-a-nic/
[3] https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/the-problem-with-solutions/
[4] https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/resources/videos/learning-improve/

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COORDINATED TO ACCELERATE THE DEVELOPMENT, TESTING, AND REFINEMENT OF INTERVENTIONS AND THEIR EFFECTIVE INTEGRATION INTO PRACTICE ACROSS VARIED EDUCATIONAL CONTEXTS

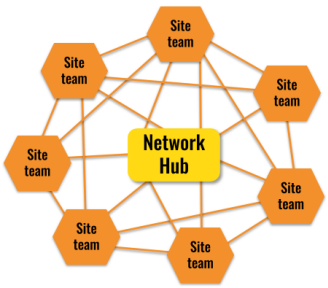
NICs are, by their nature, often large and widely distributed communities. Careful coordination is necessary to ensure that they work well. Commonly held aims (and measurement systems that attend to them), shared understanding of the problem (and means of addressing them), and rigorous publicly understood methods all help to organize collective effort in the address of complex problems. Serious investment in knowledge management[5] helps with the spread and use of the knowledge about improvements generated within the NIC.

HOW ARE NICS STRUCTURED AND ORGANIZED?

NICs are often temporary organizational structures, convened for purposes of solving a particular problem, that may reconfigure or disband when the specified aim is achieved. NICs may form within an existing organization or be entirely new entities, with member teams from multiple different organizations (e.g., multiple districts, or a combination of schools, universities, and community organizations) coming together out of interest in solving a particular problem.

NETWORKS ORGANIZED AS A WEB OF MEMBERS, COORDINATED BY A LEADERSHIP HUB

NICs bring together individuals and organizations who are invested in learning together to solve a particular problem. NICs are typically composed of smaller improvement teams – often site teams – supported by a Network Hub or leadership team. When NICs are functioning at their best, members of a NIC are interconnected with each other as well as the network Hub. The Hub coordinates and facilitates the network's learning activity and supports the different improvement teams in their separate and collective activity.



Members may bring research knowledge or practical knowledge about the problem of focus, including knowledge about the specific context in which they are working. They may also bring knowledge of improvement science methods. While exactly what roles and organizations are represented in a NIC will vary, all three kinds of expertise – research, practical, and improvement – are essential to a healthy and actively learning networked improvement community.

TYPICAL HUB ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Network hubs manage the network's development as an organization and support the improvement activity and learning in the network. They set up collaborative structures and network routines, establish norms for how network members work together, and monitor network health. Hubs consolidate learning taking place in different sites and share it back with network members in service of accelerating learning. NIC Hubs also manage their own development and activity in service of the network, and manage relationships and interaction with other key players in the larger environment in which the NIC and its members operate.

[5] https://www.carnegiefoundation.org/blog/designing-collective-learning-system/