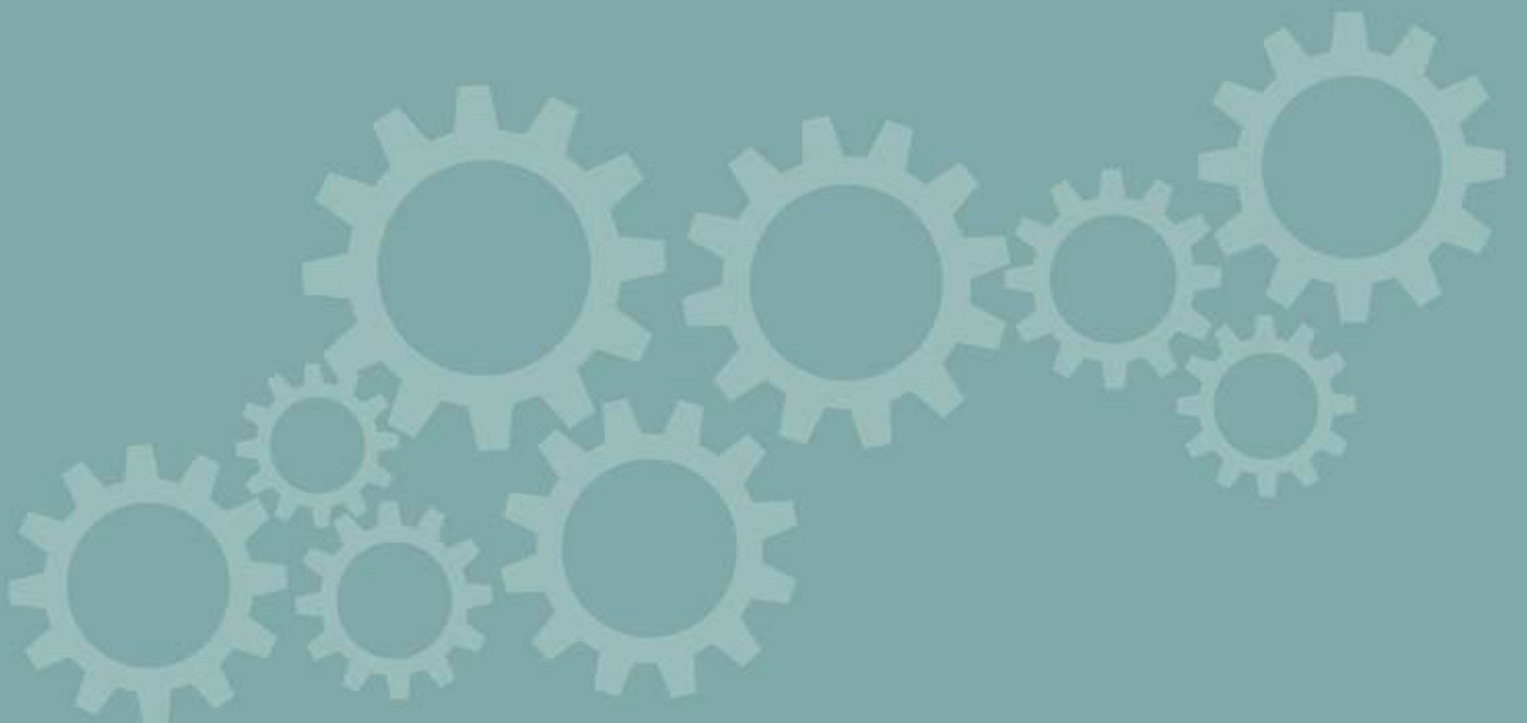

How to Design Collaborative Action Research

Professor Christopher Chapman and Professor Mark Hadfield



What Works Scotland (WWS) aims to improve the way local areas in Scotland use evidence to make decisions about public service development and reform.

We are working with Community Planning Partnerships involved in the design and delivery of public services (Aberdeenshire, Fife, Glasgow and West Dunbartonshire) to:

- learn what is and what isn't working in their local area
- encourage collaborative learning with a range of local authority, business, public sector and community partners
- better understand what effective policy interventions and effective services look like
- promote the use of evidence in planning and service delivery
- help organisations get the skills and knowledge they need to use and interpret evidence
- create case studies for wider sharing and sustainability

A further nine areas are working with us to enhance learning, comparison and sharing. We will also link with international partners to effectively compare how public services are delivered here in Scotland and elsewhere. During the programme, we will scale up and share more widely with all local authority areas across Scotland.

WWS brings together the Universities of Glasgow and Edinburgh, other academics across Scotland, with partners from a range of local authorities and:

- Glasgow Centre for Population Health
- Improvement Service
- Inspiring Scotland
- IRISS (Institution for Research and Innovation in Social Services)
- NHS Education for Scotland
- NHS Health Scotland
- NHS Health Improvement for Scotland
- Scottish Community Development Centre
- SCVO (Scottish Council for Voluntary Organisations)

This is one of a series of papers published by What Works Scotland to share evidence, learning and ideas about public service reform.

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Context

This “how to” draws on our previous work on facilitating and developing collaborative approaches to Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and Collaborative Action Research (CAR). Within the context of What Works Scotland we have developed a CAR approach that provides an overarching framework to allow the distinctiveness of each case study site to be investigated, therefore illuminating the nuance and context specificity of developments within each setting while providing an overarching structure and process to support the identification of key themes and trends across the wider What Works Scotland programme of research. In this paper we focus specifically on designing CAR to engage a broader constituency beyond a committed band of enthusiasts.

Where to start?

For the purposes of this “how to” we focus on some considerations for designing CAR. One of the first challenges is defining a focus for the work. We tackle this in a practical sense with a ‘tool’ at the end of the article. One of the other initial challenges is moving an idea for the Collaborative Action Research (CAR) out from a small group of interested activists, who know each other well, to a wider group of leaders and staff.

A common issue associated with CAR is the failure to recognise different approaches are needed to draw in other leaders and staff who have been less involved or appear less interested in the idea. This can result in a small group of activists who quickly become a marginalised clique rather than part of a purposeful widespread movement.

Therefore, those involved in developing CAR initiatives must make a clear distinction between the processes used in working with enthusiasts (micro-mobilisation) and those used to bring in other colleagues. We identify four key leadership activities - courting, aligning, connecting, and embedding - underpinning mobilising and motivating others (see figure 1).

Figure 1: The leadership of mobilisation

		Leadership activity	Example
Micro-mobilisation	Courting	Approaching potential partners, developing proposals for new collaboration.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Collecting contacts and courting possible partnerships. ○ Building links with leaders with similar foci or those who offer learning opportunities.
	Aligning	Winning leadership buy-in through individual or group negotiation. Preparing plans for the collaboration which reflect their areas of concern.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Developing mission statements, network-wide focus or specific research foci. ○ Whole-organisation target-setting and strategy building. ○ Establishing of steering groups.
Macro-mobilisation	Connecting	Creating structured opportunities for colleagues to work together.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Establishing and allocating network-based roles and responsibilities ○ Skill development to lead, facilitate or participate in networks such as leadership training or presentation skills
	Embedding	Institutionalising the collaboration through its formal links within and between schools and growth of informal relationships.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Creation lead learner forums, cadre groups, leadership learning groups, learning partnerships, organisational improvement groups

Those involved in designing CAR need to identify the activists and blockers

CAR and micro-mobilisation

Micro-mobilisation involves drawing on different forms of ‘capital’ to establish the collaboration. These are:

- Social (or Cultural) capital – This is the range and quality of an organisation’s connections, both between members of the organisation, and those beyond it.
- Intellectual capital – The knowledge within individuals and organisations that can be made available to the network.
- Organisational capital - The knowledge and skill about how to improve organisations by making better use of their intellectual and social capital.
- Physical capital – These are the material resources, including financial, that are available to schools and that will be made available to others.

(adapted from Hargreaves, 2003)

So when thinking of who needs to 'mobilised' at this stage the activists need to target the key gatekeepers and holders of these various forms of 'capital'.

Those involved in designing CAR need to consider who needs to be brought on-board and when, and how they should be involved to ensure that these various forms of capital will become distributed across the CAR activity?

Micro-mobilisation is 'micro' in two senses of the word. First, it is targeted at specific individuals, the key leaders at different levels within organisations across the collaborative whose approval or support is needed to release the capital required to allow the initiative to function. Second, it is 'micro' in the sense that it relies on individual negotiations and is based within the activists' relationships with this key first wave of potential recruits, rather than the 'mass' tactics used later when working across the wider collaborative during macro-mobilisation.

The idea of lateral agency helps us to explain why some CAR is more successful than others in mobilising these key leaders. Lateral agency is the capacity of individuals to work across boundaries and engage with colleagues in other settings to change their practices. This is a key aspect of the collaborative capacity and lateral agency tends to be easier for individuals to exert on their peers who work in similar positions in other settings. Partially this is a matter of opportunity; groups in the same position within an organisational hierarchy have similar patterns of workload and availability. Peers also tend to share similar responsibilities and problems, so collaboration with them is often intrinsically worthwhile in terms of being able to share concerns and pick up new ideas. There are also cultural issues, in that similar groups share a great deal of common knowledge about the pressures and issues that occupy them.

More successful CAR tends to work strategically so activists influence others at the same level within organisational structures, so senior leaders set out to influence other senior leaders, middle level leaders influence other middle level leaders etc. However, they also work at multiple levels so that not just senior leaders work with their peers. It is also important to develop vertical relationships and strong vertical structures to support CAR initiatives.

Those involved in designing CAR initiatives should ensure lateral agency is maximised by peers at similar levels working together and this is supported by activity at various levels and strong vertical structures.

Strong vertical relationships and structures support communication within the collaborative endeavour. This tends to develop a strong consensus, involving:

- Frame bridging - *providing information to those already disposed to your cause so that they identify with it.*
- Frame extension - *where the boundaries of the cause are expanded so that they encompass the agendas of potential recruits.*
- Frame amplification - *this places emphasis on the compatibility of the values and beliefs of the movement with those of potential members.*
- Frame transformation - *involves changing the views of potential recruits so that they aligned more closely with change agenda being laid out.*

Activists involved in CAR may have to engage in all four such practices to develop a clear focus (see tool 1 - Agreeing a focus) and sufficient consensus across key leaders so that when they mobilise CAR activity it doesn't splinter into several different areas of activity.

Those involved in designing CAR initiatives should pay attention to developing consensus across the initiative.

CAR and macro-mobilisation

The shift from micro to macro-mobilisation is an important phase in the development of a CAR initiative and is often one of the most challenging in establishing sustainability. Macro-mobilisation involves two elements: connecting and embedding.

The connecting phase is based on developing structures that draw colleagues into working together on joint CAR activity. Appropriate activities, include:

- Joint planning sessions
- Studies of practice
- Organisational Rounds
- Improvement Science
- Launch, follow up and celebration events

Embedding is marked by the development of the groups that link within and between organisations' CAR activities. Groups may be brought together because of shared expertise or responsibilities, such as community engagement officers, or LA based professional development co-ordinators. These groups and structures need leadership. Unsurprisingly, middle leaders tend to play a key role in the development of this aspect of CAR.

Macro-mobilisation relies on those taking part to embrace new leadership roles to establish CAR processes, create the structures to sustain them and connect staff across a network. In this 'connecting' phase of macro-mobilisation it is therefore key that network processes are generative of structures that will support future connections and actions.

The embedding part of macro-mobilisation comes about through the groups established around key activities developing the reach of the CAR activity into more areas. At this point of establishing the network it is particularly important to have the right people involved in

CAR who have sufficient ‘clout’ –in terms of their status or roles and responsibilities or sufficient ‘credibility’ –because of their expertise or experience, to convince colleagues to change their practice. For example, in a school setting, the ‘teaching and learning strategy managers group’ (established in one CAR network) was recognised as requiring the participation of ‘*the senior person in [each] school, apart from the head, who was leading on teaching and learning*’. This was crucial to the success of the CAR both in terms of participants being knowledgeable and able to report on current teaching developments but also having the authority to ensure that network developments impacted on classroom practices in their school.

Those involved in designing CAR should plan for macro-mobilisation and consider how they will connect and embed colleagues and practice.

Just as important as having the right people in these groups is maintaining the correct balance between the number of times these groups meet and the what happened when they do. We describe this balance within the network as ‘the flight path’. This is because if you get the balance right the network will take off, get it wrong and it will never leave the ground. The correct flight path is when the balance between structures, in this phase the frequency of meetings and events, and processes, the quality and effectiveness of what people do when they come together, interact to generate further connections while maintaining cohesion amongst those involved.

Keeping on the correct path and getting the balance right is particularly important while establishing a CAR. We cannot afford the luxury of too much individual or collaborative learning which doesn’t make an impact on day-to-day practice, nor can they waste time and energy in too many meetings. The external accountability systems which surround us will often need to be convinced of the worth of any collaborative activity and this, and other pressures, leave them with little room for error in how they engage in CAR and networking activity. CAR is always open to criticism of ‘the mediocre reinforcing the mediocre’, lacking in powerful learning processes, or only being for the committed few. There is probably no ideal mix, but activists and leaders have to be careful about creating too restrictive or expansive a structure while avoiding the situation where a great deal of unconnected activity is taking place.

Being on the right flight path is not only a matter of the number of structures that are developing but also whether they are the right ones. Structures need to develop that can support the range of processes needed to ensure that collaborative learning and collective action results in changes in practice. There are three broad types of processes that need to be underpinned by effective structures:

- Joint learning
- Joint planning
- Joint working

To be generative at the level of the collaborative these processes need to work across groups and organisations and this may require a range of structures. These structures can vary from a programme of inter-visitations, a network-wide conference to a formal coaching and mentoring scheme.

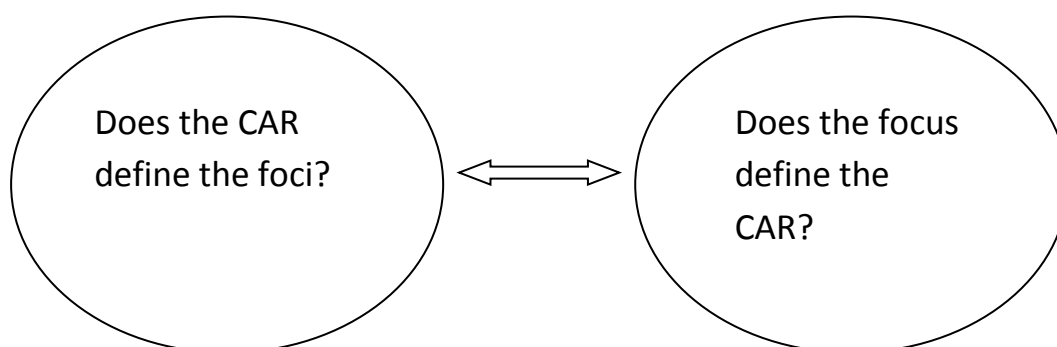
No one process or structure is more likely to lead to CAR 'taking off' than any other, more importantly it is how these productive structures and processes are combined that is the key. Leaders of collaborative action need to use various combinations of these different structures, and monitor the flow of activity they generate, in order to facilitate learning between groups and organisations that moves staff into joint planning and work that impacts on practice.

Those involved in designing CAR should reflect on the appropriate structures and processes required to effectively support the activity to take off on the desired flight path.

As mentioned at the beginning of this paper, defining a focus for CAR is crucial to the eventual success of the initiative. The following tool is designed to support you to reflect on and define the focus for CAR activity:

Agreeing a focus

The tool represents the process of developing a focus as akin to moving through a series of funnels which gradually narrow down the focus of activity, but at the end of each funnel the options widen again before again being narrowed down. This is a visual way of representing how at certain points options expand and then later become more focussed. These expansions and contractions occur because of the movement brought about by a fundamental tension in selecting a focus.



This tension encapsulates the shifts that individuals in the CAR will go through as they move between moments of consensus building when they define the foci and then moments of buy-in as they opt to work on a certain foci rather than another.

Moving down through these funnels is based on the idea that in developing a foci across different groups it is important to recognise that they will go through a number of stages and understand where each of them are at any one time. These stages can be represented by a series of questions:

1. What do we want to learn from our CAR?
2. What do we need to learn from our CAR?
3. How can we respond as a CAR network?
4. How should we respond as a CAR network?

These stages represent a movement from wants to needs and a shift in thinking about how to respond from ideas based on what the collaborative can currently do to a more considered response based on the existing knowledge base around an area.

Defining a focus

Collecting wants and wishes - The first stage is to collect together those areas people would like to work on. In the first instance these are likely to be established ideas, drawn from individual organisational plans, or forthcoming issues that could be the result of new external policies.

How you draw together these wants and wishes depends on the degree of trust and common knowledge that exists in the network. Where high levels exist it may be a case of simply discussing plans in a meeting. Where low levels are present it may require an external facilitator to collect issues from members and process them into possible areas of collaboration.

Theme into issues – The next stage is to group potential foci together. This can require some work as; ‘solution’ based foci may appear without the actual ‘problem’ being clearly articulated, different terms being used for the same issues, and some foci being more specific versions of other broader ones. A good starting point is to circulate the emerging themes and issues around the network and ask senior leaders to look for possible connections.

What do we need to collaborate on? - At this point certain themes may appear around which people will want to collaborate. The next big question is ‘What issues are best dealt with collaboratively? What are best dealt with individually? This forces a consideration of what are the potential benefits of working together. Those foci which need people to collaborate on will be the most powerful organisers. Those where people are likely to see immediate benefits will make it easier to keep some leaders involved.

What could we do? By now the network should have decided upon a single focus, or a small number, which have relevance to all the members of the network and around which they can work. But how to work collaboratively around the foci? Again it is important in the consensus building process to generate options about how to proceed. At this point key leaders are going to be developing a long list of potential processes and interventions they would like to make. This will reveal differences in preferred ways of working and levels of prior experiences with certain approaches.

Defining your focus



Additional possibilities – It may be the case that alternative responses will need to be generated by connecting with the existing knowledge base around an issue. This may involve using existing professional networks to look at how CPPs and other networks have approached similar developments. It may though require a more comprehensive search by contacting national agencies, consultants, active researchers, and local universities.

The list of possible 'coulds' should now be a relatively rich mixture of possible approaches, processes, materials, projects, and interventions. Not all of these possibilities will be worth further development and at this point some will be disregarded. For those worth further consideration additional information needs to be collected concerning their effectiveness and costs. This might involve site visits to organisations, consultations with academics and researchers and reviews of the existing literature.

The movement of possible 'coulds' to 'shoulds' starts with them being assessed against a series of criteria concerned with their effectiveness, applicability to your particular CPP/network, and cost of implementation. The specifics of these criteria will depend upon the processes and the nature of the CPP/network, and also its stage of development. A new network may wish to select interventions and processes that generate relatively quick impacts and so help convince others of the value of collaboration. In practice it is not just a question of selecting a single process or intervention but also considering how they might combine. Some may be in-depth innovations which will take time to mature but potentially could have a profound impact, while others will be more widespread and immediate but will have superficial impacts on practitioners and stakeholders.

The foci will need to be re-negotiated at several levels and points across the network. It therefore needs to be in a form which is transferable. One successful approach has been to develop the foci in a form somewhere between an enquiry question and a target.

We know 'W' so how can we use 'X' to do 'Y' to create 'Z'?

For example, if we consider this within a social care context, we know that co-production and working with, rather than on, service users can improve outcomes (W) so the problem becomes how can we use our expertise in social care (X) to work collaboratively with those who use care (Y) to both design and evaluate social care provision (Z).

For example, we know that schools in our network are experiencing increasing levels of within-year pupil mobility and that this is affecting the learning capacity and energy of schools, teachers and pupils in the network (W). So how can we use the research evidence on mobility and transition (X) to improve systems and skills across the network for assessing and achievement tracking individual pupils (Y) in order to minimise learning loss?

Conclusion

It is our expectation that the ideas presented in this paper will inform the development of the CAR approach across the What Works Scotland programme of research and beyond. It is likely that this will involve What Works Scotland staff working with different parts of the system to develop a shared understanding about the potential of CAR to support the public service reform in Scotland.

The principles outlined within this paper are not limited to a specific service or professional context, neither are they limited to a locality and can be used locally with practitioners to explore practice and communities or nationally with agencies and government to explore policy-related issues. How CAR can be used is limited only by resources and the imagination of those involved with the process.

References

Hargreaves, David H. *Education Epidemic, Transforming secondary schools through innovation networks*, Demos, 2003