This blog is part of a series¹ that identifies and discusses practical issues that arise in initiating networked improvement communities (NICs). While other contributors have written from the perspective of those doing such work, my contribution is something of a twist, in that I write from the perspective of an external observer whose research focuses on large-scale, network-based educational improvement as a matter of policy and practice.

As an external observer, I find that drawing on metaphors and analogies from sectors beyond education helps to highlight essential features of improvement-focused enterprises in ways that open them up for deeper understanding. In fact, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching uses this approach; it draws analogies to the health care sector and to the collaborative practice of physicians to illuminate ways that NICs can empower educational professionals to produce, use, and refine practical knowledge in new and exciting ways.

To help locate NICs on the organizational vanguard, I find myself drawing analogies between NICs and the “pop up” businesses that have so quickly captured the public’s fancy.
A revolutionary business strategy that began world-wide in the mid-2000s, **pop up businesses** are enterprises (with total revenues in the billions of dollars) that quickly open and close in response to changing opportunities and needs. Often linked to urban revitalization, pop up businesses[1] are part of a populist movement through which entrepreneurs, artists, small scale farmers, restaurateurs, and others are leveraging unused buildings, land, and other space in long-struggling communities.

Viewing NICs from the perspective of pop up businesses reveals positive comparisons.

Viewing NICs from the perspective of pop up businesses reveals *positive comparisons* that deepen our understanding. For example, it does much to capture the vitality and excitement of network initiation represented so clearly in earlier contributions to this blog series. It conjures up images of diverse teams of educational professionals quickly mobilizing in new ways around urgent and common problems of practice, pooling their knowledge to analyze root causes and to propose designs for moving forward, and collaborating to quickly hone those designs to a fine edge. This type of trans-organizational “rapid response” also helps to realize the possibility of NICs producing, using, and refining practical knowledge at a faster rate than conventional educational research and development.

But viewing NICs from the perspective of pop up businesses also reveals *stark contrasts*, with the “pop up” perspective serving as something of a straw man, useful for pushing our understanding even further. The “pop up” perspective would have us expect that initiating NICs is a straightforward undertaking, requiring little by way of new investment, infrastructure, or operating capital in order to exploit the pre-existing creativity, capabilities, and knowledge of their founders. Further, it would have us believe that NICs are short-lived enterprises, with little (if any) value lost in quickly folding up and moving on in pursuit of new opportunities. Finally, we might expect that leading and managing NICs would require more entrepreneurial moxie than business acumen, as founders would have no need to concern themselves with such matters as long-term funding, growth, or strategic planning.

Initiating and establishing functional NICs is complicated and challenging work.
Yet, as evidenced clearly in the earlier contributions to this blog series, the work of initiating, sustaining, and leading NICs could not deviate more starkly from the preceding caricature. Initiating and establishing functional NICs is complicated and challenging work that plays out over months and years and that does not happen overnight. As detailed in the five-point NIC Initiation Framework, it requires formidable investment in formal and social infrastructure to support new forms of collaboration among diverse members with little—if any—history of working together. Moreover, rather than serving as inputs to this collaboration, essential knowledge and capabilities are outcomes of this work, including new capabilities for collaborative analysis, new understandings of problems of practice, and new knowledge and skills that can used by practitioners in addressing those problems.

Rather than quickly folding up and moving on in pursuit of new problems of practice, the steep costs incurred in initiating NICs create formidable incentives to sustaining these networks. Indeed, the payoff on this initial investment can be impressive as well, in the form of newly-created organizational, social, and intellectual capital. This value cannot be extracted from these networks and somehow “banked up” and re-distributed. Instead, it resides in the very fabric of these networks, such that much of it simply evaporates if, and when, networks cease to operate.

Finally, the work of initiating and sustaining NICs places tremendous demands on the knowledge and capabilities of network leaders that stretches far beyond entrepreneurial moxie. This work requires leaders to establish novel trans-organizational networks, to manage distributed inter-organizational learning, and to fund the lot. It also requires thinking carefully and strategically about growing networks in order to leverage newly-created value to improve education for more and more students.

Long-term payoff is the establishment of new types of self-improving educational systems.

Managing potential growth is a puzzle unto itself. At the time of network initiation, it requires the identification of practical problems that are sufficiently contextualized so that they are meaningful to founding members yet sufficiently general as to attract and benefit new
members. It requires thinking about initiation not as a “one-and-done” proposition but as a matter of active, dynamic network construction and reconstruction over time, as members enter and exit the network. And, to reach more and more schools, it often requires moving beyond early adopters and into schools that are much more variable (and possibly weaker) in their initial commitment and capabilities.

As an external observer, analogizing between NICs and pop up businesses helps to highlight what I see as two key takeaways from this blog series on network initiation. Certainly, network initiation is invigorating and exciting work at the cutting edge of organizational strategy, with one immediate payoff being psychic rewards for those taking on the challenge. At the same time, network initiation is also complex, uncertain work that requires sweat equity, formidable investment, and considerable patience. But the long-term payoff is the establishment of new types of self-improving educational systems that can better serve more students in ways that we are just beginning to imagine, let alone understand.

[1] Pop up businesses also parallel an established approach to addressing seasonal markets: for example, Halloween stores, Christmas tree lots, firework stands, and roadside flower and produce markets.

Links

2. https://www.popuprepublic.com