

Networking: HertsCam's superpower

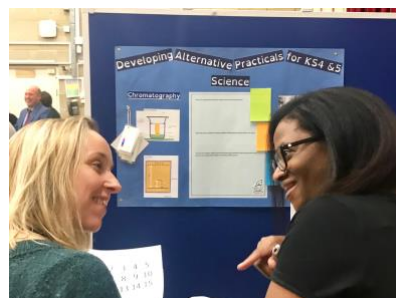
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We often use the abbreviated term 'HertsCam', but the full name of the organisation is HertsCam Network. The second of word of the title reflects something precious – our networking programme. This was particularly successful in 2021-22: it not only survived the pandemic but had been strengthened by the experience.

The networking programme

The programme last year began with a virtual International Network Event in October and was followed by further online events in November, February and March. In May there were face-to-face events hosted by several schools who had invited other schools in their vicinity to join in. Host schools included Broxbourne School, Burnt Mill Academy, Queens School and Wormley C of E Primary School. Another event was jointly hosted by Barnwell school, John Henry Newman Catholic School and the Stevenage Education Support Centre. The programme culminated with our Annual Conference, an international, online event with at least 150 participants.



Our networking programme is remarkable in so many ways. First, it is very *inclusive* in that anyone involved in or related in some way to HertsCam can participate and have a voice. Second, it is *enduring* in that you can continue to participate long after you have completed a programme with us. Third, it provides an increasingly rare context within which busy education practitioners can gather together within a *protected space* to exchange ideas, offer each other critical friendship and inspiration. Fourth, it is *international*; in the past academic year, in addition to those from various parts of the UK, we have had participants from Egypt, Greece, Kazakhstan, Malaysia, Moldova and Romania. In 2022-23, we look forward to including colleagues from the countries involved in the Learning Circles project which includes Brazil, Columbia, Cote D'Ivoire, Ghana, Malaysia, South Korea and Switzerland.

How does it work?

What happens at these events? Whether they are online or face-to-face, participants come along to share narratives about the development projects they are leading or have led and engage in discussion with other practitioners about leading change and improving professional practice. Typical project titles include:



- Developing strategies for embedding parent engagement into the school
- Developing a programme to promote students' financial awareness
- Developing a new approach to engaging disaffected, disadvantaged teenage boys
- Developing a holistic, whole-school approach to promoting infants' literacy

Discussion within break-out groups tends to revolve around two main things: one is the particular aspect of practice that the individual has been trying to develop, with participants bringing their own experience in that area into the conversation. The second is a common theme in such group discussions - the leadership of development work. The talk is typically about how to create and manage collaboration with colleagues to ensure that emerging practices become embedded in the routines of the school. This is where we learn about the practicalities of exercising leadership.

Getting feedback on events

In HertsCam we have been organising networking for many years because we knew that practitioners want to learn from, and with, their peers and that professional knowledge should be rooted in the experience of actual life in schools and classrooms. However, when we ask those who participate in our network events what they have valued in a particular event, we see a multi-faceted picture emerging. At the end of each event, we conduct a very efficient feedback exercise. It is a key principle for us that these events should not make unreasonable demands on teachers' time. They have very full schedules as it is, so at network events, sessions are short and timings are conscientiously adhered to. In that vein, evaluations are maximally efficient; they usually involve asking everyone spend just 2 minutes writing a

comment on a post it note or in a chat box when it is an online event. The frame for this is usually something like – ‘one thing that stood out as being of most value in this event’ and ‘suggest just one way that such events could be improved’. Participants are also asked to note an action they will take following the event. This provides a wealth of helpful feedback.

So, what are the key messages from this feedback? One of the most obvious points about the benefit of teacher networking is affirmed: sharing good practice leads to gains in professional knowledge for all involved. In addition, some participants identify ‘having a voice’ as the most significant benefit. This is not as simple as it might sound. Typical comments included: *I have valued having the time and space to listen to colleagues and other professionals whilst sharing a common language reflective of values and moral agency.* Having a voice is about feeling that, at network events and within HertsCam’s activities more generally, you are in safe and protected space. It is an antidote to that feeling of isolation that many in the teaching profession experience. Being an active member of this professional community means that you are constantly interacting with colleagues, some of whom you may be meeting for the first time. Everyone has an equal voice and participants are encouraged to offer each other critical friendship which is constructive while providing alternative perspectives as well as affirmation.

Within this space you feel free to put forward your own ideas, draw attention to your achievements and sometimes air your frustrations. Participants say that one of the characteristics of this safe space is that you feel that you are properly listened to. There is a sense of mutual respect in which people feel able to tell their stories and in which, through listening to colleagues talking about their change agency, you find that your own ideas are ignited. Many participants tell us that, for the sort of reasons outlined above, they feel valued.

The 2022-23 programme

We are looking forward to the beginning of our 2022-23 networking programme with an international, online event on 8th October. This is organised with the insights we have derived from the feedback we have collected at the conclusion of each event last year.

If you want to participate and don’t already know how, please email Emma Anderson-Payne (emma@hertscam.org.uk) or Kerry Francis (admin@hertscam.org.uk) and ask for guidance.