



Edcamp unconferences: Educators' perspectives on an untraditional professional learning experience



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HIGHLIGHTS

- Edcamps are an informal, voluntary, participant-driven form of unconference.
- 769 participants commented on their Edcamp experiences and motivations.
- 94% of respondents gave positive ratings to their Edcamp experiences.
- 94% of respondents indicated interest in participating in future Edcamps.
- Participants valued the learning process more than specific learning outcomes.

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ABSTRACT

Edcamps are a free, voluntary, and participant-driven form of unconference professional development. This article reports on survey data gathered from 769 Edcamp participants. Beforehand, these educators indicated diverse motivations for their attendance, including anticipation of what, how, and with whom they would learn. Afterwards, respondents overwhelmingly gave high ratings to their Edcamp experiences, and expressed interest in participating in future Edcamps. Qualitative comments suggested that the combination of how learning occurred and with whom appeared to be the salient strength of participants' experiences. However, most participants also identified areas for improvement in the Edcamps they attended.

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1. Introduction

Many educators, scholars, and policy makers see professional development (PD) as key to the improvement of teaching, learning, and schools (e.g., Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). Although research suggests that high-quality PD can improve instruction (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijaard, 2014), traditional PD approaches are often criticized (e.g., Borko, 2004; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). However, in recent years there has been increased interest and participation in an unconventional form of participant-driven

PD known as *Edcamps*. The first Edcamp was organized in 2010, and five years later more than 925 of these unconference events have happened worldwide. This fact should be noteworthy for teachers and teacher educators, given that Edcamps are typically free and happen outside official systems of teacher preparation and development.

1.1. What is an Edcamp?

Occurring on Saturdays, Edcamps are typically one-day events that are open to any interested participants. They utilize the principles of *Open Space Technology* (OST), a structure for meetings which holds that groups with a shared focus can self-organize, collaborate, and solve complex problems (Owen, 2008). Prior to Edcamps, other unconference events and movements in a variety of countries have successfully utilized OST principles, including, for

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example, technology-focused *Barcamps*, and *Teachmeets* that were originally popularized in the United Kingdom. OST eschews traditional conference structures such as advance agendas, plans, and materials, which are thought to potentially limit participants' engagement, creativity, and collaboration. Also, OST features the "law of two feet," which encourages participants to move to conversations that meet their needs, even if this means leaving an ongoing session (Owen, 2008, p. 95). The Edcamp Foundation, a non-profit organization created by the first Edcamp's leaders, states that Edcamps seek "to bring teachers together to talk about the things that matter most to them" (n.d., para. 3).

Participants define the topics for each Edcamp's breakout sessions the day of the event during an initial phase of brainstorming, discussion, and selection. This is meant to ensure that the topics align with participants' needs and interests. As sessions are selected, event organizers assign each to a time slot and classroom, creating a schedule that is then shared with participants. Choosing topics the same day theoretically helps prevent lectures or presentations in which most participants are rendered passive. Instead, sessions are meant to be discussion-based, and participants are expected to help "build understanding by sharing their own knowledge and questions" (Edcamp Foundation, 2016, para. 3). While most camps have included any education topics chosen by the participants, some events have focused on certain themes, such as arts integration, or English language learners.

Participant testimonials spread via social media have increased awareness of Edcamps (Demski, 2012). Any interested educators can organize an Edcamp, as the Edcamp Foundation plays a facilitator role rather than attempting to limit whom hosts events. Most Edcamps have occurred in the United States, although both Canada and Sweden have seen large numbers of camps (Table 1). Edcamps have been held in no less than twenty-two countries in total. Additionally, some schools and school districts have employed Edcamp or Edcamp-like approaches for their own PD. A number of entirely virtual Edcamps have also occurred, utilizing video conferencing tools, collaborative Google documents, Twitter, and other technologies.

1.2. Theoretical perspectives

This study approached educator professional learning and Edcamps guided by three interrelated theoretical perspectives. First, Edcamps can be understood from a social constructivist perspective (Vygotsky, 1978). Social constructivism holds that learning is not an individual experience, but rather that knowledge is created through interactions such as explanation, dialogue, and negotiation. A social constructivist understanding of learning calls into question the logic of the direct-instruction PD of isolated teachers historically prevalent in many countries. Instead, PD should, engage teachers with their colleagues in the social construction of knowledge about their practice, as the Edcamp model

seeks to do. Such experiences would be more likely to result in the kind of learning that teachers need.

Our understanding of PD and Edcamps is also informed by two adult learning theories that, like social constructivism, emphasize the learner's active involvement in knowledge construction: andragogy and heutagogy. Knowles (1984) rejected the idea that adult learners' needs could be met by pedagogical approaches originally created to serve children, and offered *andragogy* as an alternative. Andragogy holds that adults need to be involved in the learning process; have reservoirs of experiences that are potential resources for learning; and are oriented towards learning which is problem-focused and has immediate relevance. *Heutagogy* (Hase & Kenyon, 2000; Kenyon & Hase, 2010) is a more recent extension of andragogy that further empowers adult learners to more fully determine their own learning path and process. Whereas in andragogy an instructor is still involved in controlling and structuring the learning experience, in heutagogy learning is largely self-directed (Blaschke, 2012). Furthermore, heutagogy prioritizes not just the acquisition of knowledge, but also the development of skills, competencies, and capabilities, such as self-efficacy, metacognition, teamwork, and creativity. The Edcamp model, with its emphasis on participants' needs, interests, and autonomy, appears to align with many of the principles of both andragogy and heutagogy.

1.3. Literature review

1.3.1. Professional development

Busy educators would be unlikely to attend Edcamps voluntarily if they did not perceive some need for PD. But many educators lack access to PD (Darling-Hammond, Wei, Andree, Richardson, & Orphanos, 2009); for example, the majority of more than 70,000 participants in a survey of educators from twenty-three countries desired more PD than they received (OECD, 2009). Despite some examples of sustained, empowering, successful PD programs, such as the Lesson Study approach which originated in Japan (Stigler & Hiebert, 1999), in many countries traditional in-service PD models typically have relied upon brief instruction in skills defined by external experts (Franke, Carpenter, Levi, & Fennema, 2001; Webster-Wright, 2009). Such approaches seek to transmit knowledge to teachers under the assumption that new techniques are easily integrated into or replace existing practices. These training activities have, however, often lacked connection to educators' work in their schools, and failed to accommodate existing practices and conditions (Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008; Webster-Wright, 2009). As a result, PD has frequently been criticized as lacking in time, relevance, active learning, and integration with school culture (Hawley & Valli, 2007). Without a strong support system in place, many teachers struggle to implement what they learn from isolated PD experiences (Doolittle, Sudeck, & Rattigan, 2008). Such critiques in part explain interest in new PD models such as Edcamps.

Table 1
Location and number of Edcamp events.

Location	Number of Edcamps
United States of America	775
Canada	73
Sweden	32
Virtual Edcamps	8
Denmark	6
China, India	4
Belgium, Indonesia, Japan, Netherlands, Zambia	3
Australia, Chile, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates	2
Brazil, Colombia, Ghana, Korea, New Zealand, Venezuela, Vietnam	1

Note: Based on events listed on the Edcamp Wiki as of 21 November 2015.

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