



Educator perceptions of district-mandated Edcamp unconferences

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HIGHLIGHTS

- Edcamps are typically voluntary, participant-driven unconferences for educators.
- The 252 participants attended three somewhat atypical district-run Edcamps.
- 71.4% of these educators rated their Edcamp experiences positively.
- Many participants valued the variety and relevance of content and the Edcamp format.
- Participants suggested areas for improvement of the content and format of Edcamps.

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ABSTRACT

Edcamp unconferences are a non-traditional participant-driven form of educator professional learning. Although Edcamp participation has typically been voluntary, this mixed-methods paper presents participants' ($N = 252$) perceptions regarding their experiences at Edcamps run by their school districts and where their attendance was required. The majority of participants rated their Edcamp experiences positively. Many participants compared the content and format of their Edcamps favorably to the professional development available to them. Participants also offered feedback regarding how their Edcamp experiences could have been improved. We discuss these results and their implications for the Edcamp model and educator professional learning.

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1. Introduction

Educators' work is dynamic and complex. To keep pace with changes in students, technologies, and education policies, teachers must pursue professional learning beyond their pre-service preparation. It comes as no surprise then that education practitioners, scholars, and policy makers alike commonly suggest that professional learning is central to the improvement of education outcomes (e.g., Lieberman & Pointer Mace, 2008; Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). However, despite this widespread agreement on the importance of educators' learning, teachers often lament the quality and quantity of the professional development (PD) available to them (e.g., Kyndt, Gijbels,

Grosemans, & Donche, 2016; OECD, 2014), and many important questions about educator professional learning remain to be answered, such as how teachers learn to change their practices, what is important to learn and from whom, and how PD experiences are translated into action (e.g., Kennedy, 2016).

Participant driven and discussion based, Edcamps are a relatively recent and under-researched addition to the professional learning landscape. The first Edcamp was organized in 2010 by educators who had attended a technology-focused unconference and became interested in how an open, crowd-sourced meeting format might work for educators (Swanson, 2014). *Unconferences* are loosely structured events that emphasize ad hoc information exchange among participants, instead of a pre-determined, structured conference program of events. Edcamps eschew conference elements such as pre-arranged speakers and formal presentations because of how these elements potentially limit participants' engagement, creativity, and collaboration (Boule, 2011). Instead,

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participants populate the schedule with topics important to them and look to each other for information and inspiration. By mid 2018, more than 1900 Edcamp events had occurred in 35 different countries (Edcamp Foundation, n.d.).

Edcamps are free to participants and can be organized by anyone who takes the initiative. For many years Edcamps had a grassroots quality; events typically were associated with the city or region in which they occurred, and participation was voluntary. However, in recent years, individual schools and school districts have also begun to host Edcamps, with some choosing to limit attendance to district employees and others allowing any interested parties to attend. In this research, we explored the experiences of participants at Edcamp events that were organized by school districts specifically for their own employees and for which attendance was expected as part of the employees' work obligations. Before providing further description of the Edcamp model, we describe the conceptual framework upon which Edcamps are based.

1.1. Conceptual framework

The original Edcamp's organizers developed their model based on the tenets of *Open Space Technology* (OST) (Swanson, 2013), an approach which posits that groups of adults with a shared purpose can collaborate, self-organize, and tackle complex problems when provided an appropriate environment (Owen, 2008). Described variously as a participatory process, a meeting strategy, and a large group intervention, OST provides a structure or format for groups of people to address a common concern. OST is designed for use in situations "where a diverse group of people must deal with complex and potentially conflicting material in innovative and productive ways" (Owen, 2008, p. 15).

Because of frustration with traditional, formal meeting and conference structures, Harrison Owen designed OST to capture the energy and learning that he felt often occurred in more informal spaces, such as coffee breaks (Owen, 2008). OST is intended to access the collective wisdom of communities with shared interests by creating spaces in which the professional and experiential knowledge of participants "can emerge to inform the meeting's agenda and coalesce to produce rich and creative outputs" (O'Connor & Cooper, 2005, p. 1). In order to create such spaces, OST eliminates agendas or presentations that are controlled by an individual leader or expert, and that render most participants passive (Lightfoot, Pappas, & Chait, 2003). Instead, the OST approach promotes interaction among participants and empowers them to help determine the topics and challenges to be discussed. In lieu of a preplanned schedule, OST events begin with a democratic, consultative brainstorming process to create an agenda focused on the particular needs and interests of those present. Once salient topics have been identified, participants break out into small discussion groups. Participants are meant to move freely between breakout groups based on their interests, thus shifting greater responsibility for the experience onto the attendees. Depending on the length of the event and the number of topics selected, there may be multiple rounds of breakout conversations. By inviting attendees' active participation, the OST format is meant to encourage the flow of ideas and the development of connections between people.

OST has been utilized in various settings. Owen (1997) has suggested that it can focus on the participating individuals and the ways in which they carry out their duties, and also function as a "broader organizational intervention strategy" (p. 157). However, he also acknowledged that "in the wrong situation, OST may create more problems than it solves," (2008, p. 15). OST might not be appropriate for scenarios in which the goal is to learn a specific

technical skill with which none of the participants have experience or expertise. For OST to work, attendees themselves need a participatory mindset and the group must include some individuals with skills for facilitating discussions and collaborative problem solving. Given OST's reliance on self-organization, the sponsor or host must also be willing to trust the participants (Owen, 2008). Despite the early history of Edcamps being attended by participants who chose to do so on their own time and without direct financial or other formal incentives, OST itself does not dictate that involvement must be completely voluntary. For example, Owen (2008) has reported on instances of OST's successful use in corporate contexts where many participants' attendance was required.

1.2. What are Edcamps?

The term *Edcamp* is used to describe what are typically one-day OST events for educators. Edcamps start with a democratic, whole-group brainstorming and discussion session during which the topics for breakout sessions are proposed and assigned rooms, time slots, and sometimes a facilitator. Sessions are supposed to be discussion based, and participants are meant to contribute based on their interests and experiences. Because breakout topics are defined the day of the event, sessions generally do not feature formal presentations. Technologies such as Google docs and Twitter are often utilized during Edcamps for networking, to provide additional channels for communication among attendees, and to facilitate resource sharing. Edcamps usually end with a second whole-group session that includes opportunities for participants to engage in brief, impromptu sharing of and reflection upon what they learned.

Edcamps generally address whatever topics are of interest to the people who are present and include participants from various education roles. Many Edcamps have attracted participants from multiple school districts, thus creating possibilities for the sharing of ideas and resources across traditional boundaries and the development of cross-institutional networks. There have also been a small number of Edcamps that have focused on specific themes (e.g., Science, English Language Learners, Special Education) and populations of educators (e.g., Edcamp Leader). A handful of Edcamps have occurred entirely online (e.g., Edcamp Voxel).

The leadership team of the first Edcamp created the non-profit Edcamp Foundation (<https://www.edcamp.org>), to provide information and support to educators interested in attending or organizing Edcamps. Since receiving a large grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the Edcamp Foundation has expanded its support for Edcamp organizers. For instance, in the U.S.A. it provides a free *Edcamp in a Box* resource kit to organizers and has hosted multiple regional summits for Edcamp organizers. Educators can apply to the foundation for *Impact Grants* that are meant to help participants build upon what they learned at an Edcamp event. The Foundation has also created a "District Initiative" to support districts wishing to offer Edcamps. The program trains local leaders and helps customize the Edcamp experience to meet the district's needs. Rather than being proprietary about resources, the Edcamp Foundation has supported an ethos in which materials created for Edcamps are freely available to others (Baker-Doyle, 2017).

1.3. Literature review

To understand why educators choose to participate in Edcamps, and why some school administrators are now organizing such events, it is necessary to consider the larger context of professional learning available to educators. Educator professional learning has multiple forms and purposes (Kennedy, 2005; Lieberman & Pointer

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