Educators' perspectives on the impact of Edcamp unconference professional learning

Jeffrey Paul Carpenter [a, *], Jayme Nixon Linton [b]

[a] *Elon University, Campus Box 2105, Elon, NC, 27244, USA*
[b] *Lenoir Rhyne University, LR Box 7539, Hickory, NC, 28603, USA*

HIGHLIGHTS

- Edcamps are voluntary, participant-driven unconferences for educators.
- 91.4% of respondents credited Edcamps with changing their professional practices.
- Most common were changes to classroom technology use and instructional practices.
- Respondents reported barriers to and supports for enacting what they had learned.
- Student learning impact often related to engagement, experiences, and dispositions.

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Edcamps are a voluntary, democratic form of unconference. This paper presents participants' perceptions regarding the impact of Edcamps. Data were gathered from a survey and interviews (N=105). Participants overwhelmingly reported that Edcamp experiences caused changes in their practices and in student learning. The impacts of Edcamps were often described in terms of student engagement, experiences, and dispositions, rather than traditional measures of achievement such as test scores. Participants experienced various obstacles and supports as they utilized what they had learned at Edcamps. Considering these results, the Edcamp model and its implications for other forms of teacher learning are discussed.

1. Introduction

While research on educator professional learning has frequently addressed more formal professional development (PD) programs, few educators restrict their learning solely to such contexts (e.g., Kelly & Antonio, 2016; Kyndt, Gijbels, Grosemans, & Donche, 2016; Trust, Krutka, & Carpenter, 2016). While more informal modes of professional learning have long existed (Eraut, 2004), in recent years Web 2.0 has expanded opportunities for educators to engage in conversation and collaboration with educators beyond their physical workplace (e.g., Wesely, 2013). Rather than having to wait

passively for school- or district-provided PD that may or may not meet their needs, educators today have many avenues by which they can seek out and direct their own professional learning (e.g., Carpenter & Krutka, 2014, 2015; Trust, 2017). Although much of this participant-driven professional learning occurs in online spaces, one face-to-face manifestation of this trend can be found in *Edcamp* unconferences. This paper builds upon Carpenter and Linton's (2016) findings related to participants' perceptions of Edcamps and presents' results related to the impact of Edcamp participation on teaching and learning.

1.1. Edcamps

After the first Edcamp in 2010, more than 1500 of these events had occurred in 35 different countries by mid-2017 (Edcamp Wiki, n.d.). Similar to other unconferences, Edcamps reject many

* Corresponding author.
E-mail addresses: jcarpenter13@elon.edu (J.P. Carpenter), jayme.linton@lr.edu (J.N. Linton).

traditional conference elements such as advance agendas and pre-planned presentations in order to avoid limiting participants' creativity, collaboration, and engagement (Boule, 2011). Edcamps are typically free, one-day events open to all participants, and can be organized by any interested educators. They are based upon the principles of *Open Space Technology* (OST), an approach which posits that groups with a shared focus can self-organize, collaborate, and address complex problems if provided an appropriate environment (Owen, 2008). OST principles have been applied in other contexts, such as with *Teachmeets*, another form of educator unconference that is popular in the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand.

Edcamps begin with a whole-group brainstorming and discussion session during which the topics for the day's various breakout sessions are defined. Those topics are immediately assigned rooms, time slots, and sometimes a facilitator. Sessions are meant to be discussion-based, and participants are expected to actively contribute based on their interests and expertise. Participants are also encouraged to move between sessions if they find that a particular session is not meeting their needs. Edcamps typically conclude with another whole-group session that often includes some form of lightning sharing that allows participants to present ideas or reflections, and the distribution of donated door prizes. Also, technologies such as collaborative Google docs and Twitter are often actively used during Edcamps to provide digital backchannels for communication and sharing of resources.

The Edcamp Foundation, a non-profit organization created by the leaders of the first Edcamp (see https://www.edcamp.org), provides information and support for educators interested in attending or organizing Edcamps. In 2015, the Foundation received a significant grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, which has allowed it to expand its support for Edcamp organizers. For example, it has hosted several regional summits for Edcamp organizers and provides an "Edcamp in a Box" resource kit to organizers who request one.

1.2. Theoretical frameworks

Two related theories of adult learning inform our perspective on Edcamps: andragogy and heutagogy. Knowles (1984) challenged the idea that pedagogical approaches created with children in mind could meet mature adult learners' needs, and defined *andragogy* as an alternative theory tailored to adults. Andragogy asserts that adults should be involved in the learning process, must perceive a need to learn something, are oriented towards problem-focused and immediately valuable learning, and possess reservoirs of experiences – both successes and failures – that are resources for learning. Additionally, andragogy prioritizes adults' internal motivations to learn over external motivations.

More recently, *heutagogy* (Kenyon & Hase, 2010) has expanded upon andragogy to further empower adults to determine the path of their own learning. Heutagogy prioritizes the creation of environments that facilitate self-determined learning. While andragogy assumes that an instructor is still heavily involved in guiding the learning experience, any instructor in heutagogy plays a more limited role as a provider of advice and resources (Blaschke, 2012). Heutagogy is intended to prepare learners for lifelong learning and the complexity and pace of change of the modern workplace. Heutagogical practices attend not just to knowledge and skill acquisition, but also to learning how to learn. Thus, heutagogy places emphasis on the development of capabilities and competencies such as teamwork, self-efficacy, reflection, and creativity (Kenyon & Hase, 2010). With its attention to the learning environment, and participants' motivations and autonomy, the Edcamp model aligns with many of the principles emphasized by andragogy and heutagogy.

1.3. Literature review

1.3.1. Educator professional learning

Many educators, scholars, and policy makers concur that educator professional learning is key to the improvement of teaching and student learning (e.g., Kennedy, 2016; Opfer & Pedder, 2011). The complex and evolving nature of educators' work necessitates that they continue to learn beyond their initial professional preparation. Educators must engage in ongoing learning in order to respond to new and ever-changing students, education policies, technologies, and expectations. As John Cotton Dana is reported to have said many years ago, "He who dares to teach must never cease to learn."

Educator professional learning takes many forms and has varied purposes (Kennedy, 2005). Some educators read and reflect independently in order to improve in their craft. Others enroll in courses or degree programs at higher education institutions to pursue additional knowledge, skills, certifications, and/or pay increases. Most schools and school districts also provide a range of both required and voluntary professional learning opportunities for their employees. The foci of professional learning activities can vary widely, from emphasis on participants' acquisition of discrete knowledge deemed important by outside experts, to educators themselves developing and sharing new knowledge through action research (A. Kennedy, 2005; M. Kennedy, 2016).

1.3.2. Educator professional development

To date, research on educator professional learning has tended to focus on formalized PD programs (Kyndt et al., 2016; Wesely, 2013). While prior research suggests that well-designed PD can help improve instruction (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001; Van den Bergh, Ros, & Beijaard, 2014), criticism of traditional PD approaches is common (Hofman & Dijkstra, 2010; Kyndt et al., 2016). And indeed, in some cases educator PD programs have resulted in not just null, but actual negative effects on participants (e.g., Borman, Gamoran, & Bowdon, 2008; Santagata, Kersting, Givven, & Stigler, 2010). Traditional in-service PD often relies upon brief instruction by external experts on specific knowledge or skills. Many such training activities have ignored the contexts of educators' work in their schools and failed to accommodate for how existing practices influence teacher learning (Kennedy, 2016; Timperley & Alton-Lee, 2008). These and other criticisms of traditional modes of PD help contribute to interest in new professional learning models such as Edcamps.

One particularly pointed criticism of educator PD relates to its lack of impact upon teaching and learning. Although in some cases PD has positively affected teacher and student learning (e.g., Matsumura, Garnier, & Spybrook, 2013; Penuel, Gallagher, & Moorthy, 2011), many PD initiatives fail to produce clear positive outcomes (Kyndt et al., 2016). This has lead some to call into question the return on investment for resources allocated to PD (e.g., The New Teacher Project, 2015). Kennedy (1999) identified a *problem of enactment* that plagues traditional PD: educators are made aware of new ideas and strategies – and even embrace these ideas in theory – but fail to actually change their practices.