

Edcamps Uncon

By Meredith Barnett



IGNITE PROFESSIONAL
DEVELOPMENT BY
UNLEARNING TRADITIONAL
ROLES AND FORMATS.

When educators arrive at an Edcamp, they won't find an agenda. There are no hand-outs, PowerPoint slides, or lectures. Instead, there's a blank session board and a stack of Post-its waiting to fill it.

For a newbie to this participant-driven form of professional development (PD), that blank slate can be inviting, intimidating, or both.

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When fourth-grade teacher Kerri Grube's school, R. H. Lee Elementary School, held an Edcamp in August, she was eager to see what topics her colleagues would suggest. Together, she and fellow educators from the Glen Burnie, Maryland, school built the day's schedule of half-hour discussions, covering Post-its with diverse topics from Chromebooks to STEAM to yoga.

"It's the best thing that you could do for staff development," says Grube, who is in her fifth year of teaching at R. H. Lee Elementary. "You get to learn what you want and get a chance to see what your colleagues can do."

Edcamps are a prime example of the new paradigm of professional development taking root in schools across the country: learning experiences that are differentiated, teacher-led, and collaborative. Here's what makes this type of learning so powerful—and how principals can use its tenets to enhance professional development in their schools.

Edcamp 101

Since the first Edcamp was held in Philadelphia in 2010, over 25,000 educators have attended similar events sponsored by schools, districts, states, and even the U.S. Department of Education, which hosted one ([#edcampUSA](#)) in June. Edcamps are "unconferences," a term for participant-driven meetings coined in the late 1990s. They are free of cost and free of vendors. Any attendee can be a presenter, and participants self-select sessions. The model grew from dissatisfaction with traditional "sit and get" professional development opportunities,

says Kristen Swanson, one of the founding members of Edcamp. Swanson says that traditional PD typically isn't responsive to what teachers actually need and offers only limited choice.

"Edcamps really put the choice and the social connection back into learning for adults," says Swanson, a former elementary school teacher. "We have found that when you add those two elements back in, people get really excited."

At an Edcamp, participants brainstorm topics they would like to learn about or are interested in presenting about, write the ideas on Post-its, and place them on a blank matrix with time slots of 30 minutes or an hour. Many Edcamps also create a digital version of the schedule (via Google Docs, for instance), and have a hashtag for attendees to share reflections on Twitter. Sessions are discussion-based, led by any participant (expert on the topic or not), and attendees can exercise the "law of two feet": they are free to (respectfully) leave a session if it isn't meeting their needs. Many Edcamps wrap up by gathering participants in the same room and inviting them to briefly share a resource, idea, or tool in a "resource smackdown."

Connections and Common Language

The Edcamp Foundation, cofounded by Swanson, helps communities plan Edcamps and offers a wiki calendar for organizers to promote the events. By definition, an Edcamp is open for any educator to attend. These events (such as Edcamp Oklahoma City, Edcamp Savannah in Georgia and Edcamp Independent Schools in Boston, all in early 2015)

draw value from bringing together diverse participants who can connect long after the event. Smaller events for just a school or district's staff members should technically be called "Edcamp-style" events or just unconferences. But a key benefit of both formal Edcamps and Edcamp-style events is that they encourage educators to explore topics that match their students' needs, while showcasing teachers' expertise.

"When we can have teachers model technology integration for their peers, it feels very relevant to them. They feel comfortable and hopefully think, 'I can do this, too,'" says Edith Conroy, superintendent of Jobstown, New Jersey's Springfield Township School District and principal of Springfield Elementary School. Administrators and teacher-leaders in her region are organizing an unconference event in November called TechShare (#techshare14), which will bring together 600-700 educators from five districts to explore tech topics from game-based learning to Google hangouts.

School-based unconferences can foster bonding among staff members and explore school-specific initiatives. For instance, R.H. Lee Elementary has three focus areas this year: STEAM, enrichment, and writing. When Grube and her colleagues convene for a second Edcamp (#edcampRHLee) mid-year, they'll have had time to explore these topics or branch into sub-topics within them, such as flipped classrooms or Genius Hour, says principal Chris Wooleyhand.

"What happens from this PD model is that you get a common language from kindergarten to fifth grade," he says. "When we are all speaking that common language, we've got a much better chance of sustaining school improvement over time."

But, for these discussions to grow (at an Edcamp-style event or otherwise), a school must first embrace a culture of learning. A principal must cultivate a climate of trust among staff members for them to feel comfortable offering their insights.

"It's difficult to have an Edcamp unless you're building and fostering a culture of teacher dialogue around instructional issues," says Wooleyhand. Teachers at his school—through study groups, focus groups, or action research groups—collaboratively examine school priorities all year. Teachers should feel as if they are part of the solution process when it comes to instructional concerns, he says. This sows the seeds for an unconference.

Infusing the Edcamp Spirit in PD

For a school working on revitalizing its adult learning culture, unconferences hold great promise. According to *How People Learn: Brain, Mind, Experience, and School*, the seminal education psychology handbook on learning, learning environments (for teachers and students alike) should be learner-centered, knowledge-centered, and assessment/feedback-centered. Edcamps and unconferences are much more learner-focused than traditional professional development: they build on the strengths, interests, and needs of individuals.

But unconferences should supplement, rather than replace *all*, professional development opportunities. A learning environment that is knowledge-centered matches the information that needs to be learned with the best delivery strategy to help learners understand it. Think of unconferences as a tool

in a principal's repertoire that can be used alongside other learning strategies—such as presentations, learning walks, book or film studies, or site visits at other schools—that can illuminate new techniques for teachers.

Ultimately, though, the principles that make an unconference so powerful can be infused into any professional development activity. Principals can reinvent any staff learning opportunity by making it:

- **Aligned with teachers' interests.** An unconference's wide-open schedule is the ultimate opportunity for personalized learning; but the lack of structure may make some leaders nervous. More organized events can still incorporate choice. The team planning TechShare, for instance, is taking a "modified unconference" approach, says Conroy, using a survey before the event to ask teachers what they'd like to learn and present about. This, she says, "encourages teachers to become ambassadors for various instructional technologies that they know."

- **Collaborative and ongoing.** Edcamps' collaborative spirit fosters communities of practice—both through in-person discussion and online connections after the event. Swanson calls this ongoing networking the "long tail" of Edcamps. According to *How People Learn*, these community-centered environments and discourse around student work are key components of educators' growth as professionals.

"There's no more of that, 'I learn it one day and then it's done after that,'" says Conroy, who hopes TechShare participants can forge lasting connections with other teachers in the region.

- **Interactive.** Teachers benefit from engaging, interactive learning experiences just as students do. The more interactive a professional learning experience can be, the better, says Swanson.

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Visit the Edcamp Foundation for a complete list of upcoming Edcamps, along with tips for starting one.


“Think about how you can get people talking and connecting with each other around topics that are meaningful to them,” she says. “That’s infusing the Edcamp spirit into whatever you’re doing.”

The New Un-Leader?

An Edcamp—with its open agenda, rich with possibility—begins with an invitation for educators to contribute and connect. But that blank session board also represents an interesting, potentially challenging, shift for principals: at an Edcamp-style event, everyone is in charge.

For an Edcamp or another non-traditional PD activity, a school leader might initiate the event. He or she might hop between discussions, snap photos or tweet, or be the one who helps shuffle sessions on the board—but the principal isn’t necessarily in charge of spearheading the day’s progress. Each Post-it inscribed with an idea—whether it’s Common Core math, Minecraft, or mobile technology for assessment—carries equal weight, and a principal can’t control where discussions may lead. But, in this new model of professional learning, rooted in the value of teacher expertise, that’s the goal. Swanson calls this key mindset being comfortable with “messiness.”

“Saying to people, ‘My role as a leader is to empower all of you and that’s why I’m intentionally taking a step back,’ is a really powerful message for staff,” she says. “That’s what we eventually want [teachers] to model and pass onto their students.”

So, to put it another way, through unconferences, principals can be “unleaders”: facilitators, supporters, and learners themselves. 

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So, you’re interested in Edcamp. What’s next?

