Edcamps: The New Rage in Personalized and Participant driven P.D.

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Abstract

An edcamp is a free peer to peer professional development event for educators. This popular format uses a constructivist, community based, learner centred model, often with an inquiry based approach that is a perfect companion to traditional expert led workshops and conferences held throughout the year. This session will include a live simulation of an edcamp event. Participants will learn how to build educator capacity using edcamps for their fellow educators, institutions and stakeholders.

The Problem

Traditional p.d formats have not always satisfied an educator’s need for personalized, collaborative and reflective learning. Furthermore, with the number and diversity of Islamic schools increasing across North America, there is a greater desire for institutions to tap into each other’s collective capacity.

Edcamps are a peer based, collaborative and cost effective one day event for educators to connect and engage on relevant topics in an intimate discussion based format. Islamic schools and other institutions serving the student community could benefit greatly from the grassroots ‘unconference’ format of an edcamp.

What is an edcamp and how is it different from a traditional workshop or conference?

Unlike traditional conferences, edcamp sessions are free, discussion based, informal events. There is no single expert in the room. All voices are valued and, with good facilitation, given adequate airtime. The topics are not typically pre-determined by organizers, rather, as per the grassroots nature of edcamps, they are suggested by edcamp attendees at the start of the day. Organizers then schedule the most popular suggestions into the program for the day.

Review of the Literature

Since edcamps and unconferences are relatively new phenomena, the research is limited but growing.

In 2012 Swanson, Miles and Leanness of the Edcamp Foundation wrote a white paper called Edcamp: A qualitative exploration. They analyzed and coded 30 reflective blogposts in the light of the four tenets of effective professional development. These tenets stated that the professional learning be learner centred, assessment centred, knowledge centred and community centred (National Academies Press, 2000). The white paper’s results indicated that ‘Edcamp events are aligned with the tenets of effective professional development.’

In 2016 Trust, Krutka and Carpenter wrote a report called Together we are better: PLNs for teachers. Their data analysis suggests that the availability of expansive PLNs (Professional Learning Networks), and their capacity to respond to educators’ diverse interests and needs, appear to offer possibilities for supporting the professional growth of whole teachers. While this research mainly focuses on online PLN’s, it discusses the desire for teachers to seek out more holistic pd opportunities beyond the traditional skills based pd workshop. In this vein they reference edcamps and unconferences as ‘Informal learning opportunities (that) allow educators to co-construct knowledge for their practice in collaboration with peers, colleagues, and other individuals who are situated locally.’ Interestingly, the strong social media activity of edcamps allows this knowledge to permeate even online and hence global PLNs.

Earlier in 2015, in an exploratory study, Carpenter investigated motivations for attendance in ‘Unconference professional development: Edcamp participant perceptions and motivations for attendance.’ He concluded that, ‘The educators in this study were motivated to attend Edcamps in their free time, rated their Edcamp experiences highly, and overwhelmingly expressed intentions to participate in future events.’

This motivation was borne out in preliminary findings from a recent study on teachers' professional learning preferences. These preferences indicated that teachers feel more supported in their work and better prepared to support their students' learning when they select their own professional learning (PL) opportunities (Howard, 2016)

‘But’ Carpenter cautions, ‘despite such enthusiasm, it is important to bear in mind a warning made more than a decade ago about new approaches to PD: ‘Replacing our old conceptions of professional development with new makes sense only if the new ideas are held up for rigorous discussion and evaluation. New is not always right’ (Wilson and Berne [1999](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19415257.2015.1036303)). Given the demands for improvement, simply being better than past low-quality PD is not good enough. When comparing Edcamps with the five critical characteristics of PD defined by Desimone ([2009](http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/19415257.2015.1036303)) – active learning, coherence, collective participation, content focus and duration – the Edcamp model arguably only checks off the active learning box.’

Surveys and anecdotal evidence of attendees of our local Islamic school teachers edcamp: Edcamp Islamic T.O. 2016 and 2017 indicated a high level of satisfaction and a strong desire to return. Educators enjoyed the camaraderie and felt energized. At the same time they felt a need for more subject matter experts to be involved in the discussion groups. This concern was addressed somewhat for the current year by inviting specialists to join the discussions. However an argument could be made that the event is about discovering knowledge gaps rather than delivering knowledge itself. The attendees share existing knowledge, recognize knowledge gaps and then determine future pds as a result of this discovery process.

Methods

How does an edcamp work? Kristen Swanson of the Edcamp Foundation details the process and characteristics below.

Edcamps are:

* **Free:** Edcamps should be free to all attendees. This helps ensure that all different types of teachers and educational stakeholders can attend.
* **Non-commercial and with a vendor-free presence:** Edcamps should be about learning, not selling. Educators should feel free to express their ideas without being swayed or influenced by sales pitches for educational books or technology.
* **Hosted by any organization or individual:** Anyone should be able to host an Edcamp. School districts, educational stakeholders and teams of teachers can host Edcamps.
* **Made up of sessions that are determined on the day of the event:**Edcamps should not have pre-scheduled presentations. During the morning of the event, the schedule should be created in conjunction with everyone there. Sessions will be spontaneous, interactive and responsive to participants' needs.
* **Reliant on the "law of two feet" which encourages participants to find a session that meets their needs:** As anyone can suggest a session, it is critical that participants are encouraged to actively self-select the best content and sessions. Edcampers should leave sessions that do not meet their needs. This provides a uniquely effective way of "weeding out" sessions that are not based on appropriate research or not delivered in an engaging format.
* Swanson then mentions how anyone can lead a session. However at our Edcamps we decided to pre-assign a leader, who is in fact a timekeeper, not an expert. The topics are determined based onhow popular they are with attendees. All teachers and educational stakeholders are professionals worthy of sharing their expertise in a collaborative setting. Any attendee can attend, participate and, if they wish, move to another session.

Recommendations of Practical Implementation

Despite the concrete definition above, it can be difficult to truly capture the Edcamp experience. That's because a "typical" day of learning at an Edcamp doesn't really exist. Each Edcamp is unique and based on the needs of the participants. Here is how the Edcamp Islamic T.O. day looked. When attendees arrive at the location (usually a school) on the day of the event, there is no pre-set schedule of sessions or presenters. Instead, there's just a blank sheet of big paper with a grid on it. Or maybe just the 1st sessions are filled out based on the initial suggestions provided by attendees when they registered online. We may also share a brief explainer youtube video such as Edcamp 101 by Suhun Lee is helpful to orient attendees.

Over breakfast attendees are asked to think about what topics matter to them. What kinds of sessions might you run or like to discuss? Here are some examples

* + Discussions on issues in education
  + Share a model lesson or unit
  + Conduct an inquiry session into a new tool
  + Share something you’re passionate about
  + Discuss new things you’d like to learn more about
  + Share activities you’re looking to improve
  + Anything else you can think of that will get other interested teachers to come and share with you

Once the board fills up with the suggested topics, attendees are free to pop in and out of each scheduled session which lasts about 40 minutes. We ensured that the facilitators of each session are not subject matter experts, but good timekeepers, who are good at ensuring all attendees have their say and can help summarize learnings by the end of the session. We encouraged experts to be part of the discussion, not the facilitation. Some facilitators may like to use a KWL chart to help guide the discussion, moving from what is Known, to what they Wonder and what they have learned. Any gaps in learning then become a good case for future pds.

We also scheduled a human library session where attendees could schedule 1:1 time with an specialist. Examples of experts included a teacher with google classroom experience, a teacher who expands their PLN using twitter, a literacy specialist and an in-school social worker. We had an informal keynote at the beginning of the day and a wrap up session with a sponsored prize giving at the end of the day. There is usually a light breakfast and lunch served which may also be sponsored. Any opportunities for attendees to connect are optimized, such as icebreakers, social media access, informative name tags, resource bulletin boards and occasions to chat during breaks, meals and transitions.

To complete the learning cycle, we emailed out a reflection survey, along with session notes. Attendees who completed the survey received a certificate of professional development. This survey had two benefits. Firstly, the Edcamp team received organizational feedback. Secondly, the attendee was able to review and reflect on sessions that they did and did not attend. Metacognitive, reflective practices are crucial to the learning process for both in class teaching and professional development. We hope to push this ownership over knowledge further by offering a ‘Legacy Grant’ this year, a small bursary for eligible educators or administrators to help them implement an idea they learned from the Edcamp.

References

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