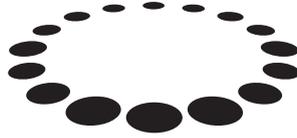


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**The Edcamp Movement:  
a Peer-to-peer Learning Initiative  
for Educators**

Kristen Swanson



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## Introduction

I'm coming to you this evening to share with you a little bit about my journey. Not my journey as a researcher, not my journey as someone who cares deeply about technology, not my journey as a wife or a sister or any of that. I'm coming to you to share with you my most important journey, and that is my journey as a teacher.

These are a few of my students that have learned alongside me, and I mean that truly, because everyday they teach me something different, for the better part of the last decade. Sometimes my students look like this. Sometimes my students look like grown-ups. Sometimes my students are the engineers at the technology company where I work, and they are by far my most difficult class.

What I would ask of you is how many teachers are here? How many people are teachers? Thank you. I know you put in a really hard day at school today. I know how tired you all are, so thank you for taking the time to come out this evening. How many folks are administrators or principals? Folks who work in schools or run schools? Couple folks? And then maybe other people who just wandered in here by accident, to get out of the rain, perhaps? What I'm really here to do today is to share with you what my students taught me about learning and how I used that to create an environment that I think has been really transformative to my development as an educator.

## Learning is social

All of this starts with this fundamental understanding that learning is very very social, especially for adults. When we are learning, we learn best when we're learning with other people. We learn best when we decide and we choose what it is that we want to learn. To kick us off this evening, I wanted to start with not an answer but a question. I wanted to start with the simple question of, "What was your best learning experience this year?"

I want you to think about that for a moment. It may have been in school. It may have been at a professional development session, but it may not have been. When I think about my three best learning experiences this year, I actually think of things that feel very different from traditional school.

I think about the time that I met someone in the library and they taught me how to use a new computer program that really helped me organize my calendar better. I thought about the time that my husband convinced me to go zip-lining. I thought about the time that my neighbor finally taught me how to get those roses to bloom. When I think about all of those learning experiences, they come down to two things. They were with people I trusted and they were things that I chose, that I wanted to learn. That is really what social learning is all about: something that you choose to learn with someone that you trust, because they have experiences that they value.

These people may not be the premier expert in the field, my neighbor is not the premier expert on growing roses. However I trusted him, his rose bushes looked much better than mine. It was something that he helped me get just a little bit better. What we're here to talk about today is learning not necessarily from experts, but instead, sharing expertise

and that we all have expertise to share. It doesn't mean that experts don't have a place and we'll talk about that because I think that's very, very important. I think that also the more we can come together as a community of learners as adults, we will find there to be a revolution in how we feel about our students, how we feel about our classrooms, and how we feel as educators about learning.

Because professional learning should be just as social as all the learning that happens in our daily lives. When I tackle all of these problems that face me in my life and when I use these social learning techniques, these are the same techniques that I can use to tackle what can happen in school and what can make my classroom instruction better. The thing that I found to be a big hurdle is that it actually looks very different, right? When we go to professional learning – when we go to learning about our classrooms and about our schools, it often looks like this. It's something that usually we are told to go to. In my case, usually my principal or the head of my school will say, “we have a professional learning session on this day and you're going to come and you're going to sit in the fourth row and you're going to listen.”

These habits that we have can be hard to break when it comes to learning. Sometimes when we want to learn something, we expect to come in and sit down and for the person up on the stage to have the answer but I don't have the answer, all I have are the questions. Because I think that the more we come together and the more we start asking these questions together, the more likely we are to find the answers, because you all have experiences that I don't have, you know things that I don't know and together we are much stronger than we are alone.

There's an expert in this field his name is Malcolm Knowles. He talks about andragogy. Andragogy is really about adult learning and how adults learn best. The two main parts of that are both responsibility in relationships and being self-directed.

This quote here talks about developing the ability to take increasing responsibility for our lives to become increasingly self-directed. About seven years ago when I started on this journey, I was doing a lot of work with some of Malcolm Knowles' understandings and some of his research and the more I learned about this gentleman, the more frustrated I

became that every time I had a professional development it looked like that.

I started to think, “How could I do this differently? How could I change?” I was in my classroom, and, I will be honest with you, I felt very isolated. I felt like when I would shut that door, I would love being with the kids but after the kids left, it was just me alone in the room trying to figure out what in the world was I going to do tomorrow to help these kids learn as much as they could in the short time that I had with them.

As I started to really think about that, a friend of mine in a casual offhand comment made a suggestion that at that time seemed incredibly crazy. They said, “If you want some new teaching ideas, why don’t you check out Twitter?” and I said, “Twitter? Isn’t that where people go to explain what they had for breakfast? Isn’t that where people go to post silly cat pictures? Why would I go on Twitter?” and my friend said, “There are teachers on Twitter and you have to know how to follow the hashtags to find these teachers.” At the time in 2009, there was one Twitter chat. You can see in this map now, there are dozens in all of the states in the United States but at that time in 2009, there was one. It was just called *Edchat*. That was the only one there was and it was on Tuesdays at noon. So Tuesdays, I would grab my lunch out of my lunch bag and I would hurry back to my classroom while the kids were at recess. I would go online and I would follow *Edchat* at noon for one hour. Teachers would just talk about different tools and links and ideas. I thought, “Man, this is kind of neat.” Not only that, all of these people are trying out these ideas in their classrooms at the same time I’m trying them out in mine. And so we had this idea around hatching baby chicks: we got some baby chicks, we hatched the baby chicks and the baby chicks had a Twitter account.

Everyday the baby chicks would tweet and we would post photos of the baby chicks doing all kinds of things at night from the Twitter account. It became a little bit of a sensation. I’m going to share a short video clip here that shows you in the very early days of how I was thinking about learning with Twitter and with social learning and with Edcamp and with some of these tools.

VIDEO CLIP

**Speaker 1:** They youngest members of Kate Dorsey’s kindergarten class of pop elementary school in Quicker Town are not her students. They are these day’s old baby chicks.

**Boy:** You better not jump little one.

**Speaker 1:** they’re also the most popular members of the class.

**Girl:** I like petting them. Molly’s mine and she’s very cute.

**Boy:** When we hold them, they don’t sit down, they stand up but the claws kind of hurt.

**Girl:** They tickle you a lot.

**Boy:** It feels fuzzy.

**Woman:** They’re just basically learning about the lifestyle, life cycle of a chick.

**Speaker 3:** Don’t be scared Molly.

**Speaker 1:** These chicks aren’t just teaching the kids about science.

**Speaker 5:** Heather, where were they?

**Speaker 6:** They escaped.

**Speaker 1:** The undisciplined creatures are actually multidisciplinary.

**Speaker 4:** And then they’re writing just about them, what they’re learning.

**Speaker 4:** We want to write, the baby chicks are starting to grow feathers.

**Speaker 1:** The students use phonics and a program called Kid Writing to put their thoughts on a Smart Board.

**Speaker 3:** The baby chicks are growing feathers.

**Speaker 1:** But that’s not all, these youngsters are also learning about the web from their web-footed friends.

**Kristen:** Well, I actually got this idea through my Twitter account.

**Speaker 1:** Instructional Specialist, Kristen Swanson hooked the kids up to an online site.

**Kristen:** They feel like they are contributors to a worldwide community. They aren’t afraid to press buttons, or do this, or do that. They just want to explore.

**Speaker 4:** It’s awesome. Every morning we go on, we check the Wiki and we see what parents have posted.

**Speaker 3:** We're playing with them, writing about them, we're making pictures of them.

**Speaker 1:** There's only one downside.

**Speaker 2:** I wish I could take a baby chick home.

**Speaker 1:** She can't take the baby chicks home, but at least they are driving home lessons for life.

**Speaker 2:** The chicks are cute and I just like them.

That was a long time ago and you can even tell when you look at some of the websites how primitive they were. That was kind of what started me on my journey, to see how excited the kids got when it wasn't just me and Miss Dorsey who were looking at their writing, instead, it was the whole world. I started to think, "Wow, maybe there are some other things that I can start to learn and there are some other people that I can start to connect to that will take me even further."

This gentleman, Kevin, sent me a tweet, a week after he saw the video that I just shared with you and he said, "You know, you seem like someone that might like this event we have called a BarCamp. Why don't you come along? It's free."

I thought, "Well, it's free. Sounds kind of interesting, sounds kind of fun. Sure, I'll give it a try." At the time, I was living in Philadelphia and it was just a few miles from my home and when I showed up, this was what I saw and it looked like complete chaos.

Now, in the past when I had been to education conferences, people would dress very formally. They would come in and everything would be quiet and organized. There might be some light music playing. This was pretty much like a mosh pit. There were people all over the place, talking to each other and laughing, and everyone was dressed very casually, and they were all gathered around this giant board. What I noticed was, the board was full of questions and ideas, because the idea of this particular event wasn't that people were coming to learn the answers but instead, people were coming to ask the questions and figure out possible things that might be answers together.

You can see people started building the session board for the actual conference, they day of the event. As someone who was very organized

and really enjoys everything to have its own place, this felt really scary to me. I couldn't believe that they were just going to have a conference based on post-it notes that they had come up with that morning. But as we went through the day, it really worked. It was really exciting to see how all of these questions turned into ideas, and answers, and resources that I hadn't thought of or hadn't known about before.

The one thing that struck me most was a comment that one of the gentleman in one of the sessions made which was, "The world is moving so fast, that if I put in a conference proposal six months ago for this session, this particular technology didn't even exist yet." The idea was this could be very responsive to what was happening in these different fields at this particular time. And so I started to really get in touch with the idea that to offer value you really just had to have expertise and good questions. You didn't necessarily have to be the leading expert in the field.

Now, we were drawing on a lot of that research, we were drawing on a lot of those experts, but some of them may or may not have been in the room. Instead, because we could all share what we knew, and we could share what we learn, and we could all say, "Have you seen this resource?" It became a community of learners. It became a place where everyone had something very valuable to offer and it was so energizing. It made me feel like I had a thousand new friends to help me on my learning journey. And as someone who was previously very isolated and felt that when I close the door to my classroom I was left there alone, this was a completely different feeling.

## The Edcamp movement

So I worked with five of my friends and said, “Hey, this was a great conference, why don’t we do this just for teachers?” Because the first one was just a general one, where anyone could come. We had people from all different fields coming. And we thought, “Let’s make one especially for teachers.” Because teaching is really hard and there’s a lot to talk about and the people who know the most about what works with kids, are the people in the classroom with kids. The people who are there every day working, and figuring this out, and testing, and sharing with each other. We came up with five rules of the road for this. These are the four tenets of Edcamp, the things that we decided to try when we ran that very first Edcamp.

*Free, open to all, vendor-free day, anyone can present and the rule of 2 feet*

The first was that we just wanted it to be free. We just said, “You know what? We’ll get a school, we’ll get a place to donate some space to us and we’ll just have it be free.” We don’t have any way to accept money, we’re not going to worry about it. The main reason we made it free was because we thought it would just be a hassle, so we said, “Free.” We said, “Open to everyone”. We wanted it to be for teachers but if a parent wanted to come and learn, we let them in. Or if a board member wanted to come in and check out what we were talking about, we said, “Yes, come on in because you have important experiences and perspectives too”.

The third was, it was vendor free. We had no one there who was trying to sell anything. A lot of times in the United States when you go to

a conference, you go into a session and someone's actually trying to sell you something instead of share what you have learned or what they have learned. We said, "No one who's trying to sell anything. We just really want people who care about the kids."

The fourth rule is probably the strangest one and it feels the strangest. That is that anyone who comes that day can offer a session, because the idea is not that they are presentations with slides. The idea is, that you ask a question to the group and then you have an interactive conversation about that question. Some of the best Edcamp sessions I've ever been to were ones where I didn't know anything about that particular topic and people came together and helped me, and pointed me to the right resources, so I could learn.

The idea that anyone can get up and share really changes the way that the environments feels, because everyone is responsible for their own learning at an Edcamp. I always tell people, "The only person to blame for a bad day at Edcamp is yourself because if you're having a really bad day, it's okay, you can just go." I think that that's really important, that if it's not working for you, that's okay. It's something that I call ... it's one item on the buffet of professional development and there are lots of items that we should be choosing and this is just one of them and it's certainly not for everyone.

Then the last, and this is really important, is the rule of two feet. I am a teacher and this rule is probably the hardest for me, because I've been taught my entire life that you don't ever get up and leave a session, unless you are incredibly offended by what is happening, or if something is on fire, or something else terrible is happening. What the rule of two feet really says is that, what you need to do is, you need to go where you grow.

You need to be in a session that's working for you. If you're not in a session that's working for you, try another session. Sometimes I've been in sessions that weren't really covering things that I needed and I ended up going out into the hallway, finding someone, sitting down with them in the hallway and having a really relevant, really powerful conversation. That's what the rule of two feet is all about, giving you as the learner the right to be a little bit selfish. Very rarely as teachers do we get to be

selfish and if you are coming out for a day of learning, you should be a little bit selfish and learn the things that you really need to learn, so that you can have that impact on kids that you want to have.

These were the first five rules of Edcamp and they were very loose. They were very loose when we first put them together. We had the very first Edcamp in May of 2010, so not too long after I had found Twitter. We had no budget and so, to get people out, we used sidewalk chalk all over the town and we drew these everyday and we would tell people all of the information and that was how we got people to know about our event.

The space that we had for our event was a building, that was set to be knocked down three days after the event and they told us security stopped showing up seven days before they knock it down, no one will ever know that you are in there. We had a very, very small budget. We advertised on Twitter, we advertised on websites, we called in to radio stations and asked them to share this information. It was very much a rag tag group of folks. To be honest on that very first morning we were looking at this blank schedule board and we had no idea if anyone was going to come. It was really, really scary.

We sat and we waited and we waited and we couldn't believe it, but people came. They filled up this entire schedule board. Now you can definitely tell that I'm an elementary teacher because it is laminated and it has sticky notes on it. You can see that this board went from being blank to being filled with the questions and ideas of a hundred educators who showed up on a Saturday to spend their time and to spend their energy answering questions to help their kids. That was the most powerful moment of my life aside from getting married and I have to say that because my husband is in the back.

A picture is worth a thousand words. This is what that day looked like. You can see we had panels and it was messy and we had people sitting next to each other with laptops and people sitting and sort of doing their own things. People organized in lots of different ways that day. The learning didn't look like learning usually looks when it comes to professional development, and if a picture is worth a thousand words, a movie is probably worth a million.

## The first Edcamp

I'm going to show you a few video clips from that very first Edcamp in May of 2009.

### VIDEO CLIP

**Speaker 1:** Edcamp is comfortable, it's motivating

**Speaker 2:** Yes, it's really cool.

**Speaker 3:** What does it mean in today's landscape to do good research?

**Speaker 3:** Edcamp is organic, participant-driven professional development, there are no keynotes, there is no set schedule and the participants set the event.

**Speaker 4:** How many of you are teacher-educators?

**Speaker 5:** The purpose of the workshops today are to put a bunch of really smart people together in a room and share ideas and talk. Really what we are trying to do at events like these are amplify each other's ideas and really leverage those that help improve what we do, that's teach kids.

**Speaker 6:** These are triple blocks so it links to increased work in 2009/2010

**Speaker 7:** We are seeing a wide range of educators coming from all of these different schools within the city, counties surrounding Philadelphia and it's leading to some really rich conversations around what's going on and where we are going in education.

**Speaker 8:** How can you play with this stuff in a way that kids are going to get something out of it?

**Speaker 9:** I love how much technology is integrated into it. We are on Twitter and you can just go and you can see what's going on, not only

in your own workshop but what's going on in all the other workshops at the same time.

**Speaker 10:** You can see it in their faces, everybody wants to raise their hands and talk because they have so many ideas to contribute.

**Speaker 11:** I think the thing to keep in mind first is this is a conversation. We don't mean this to be a lecture.

**Speaker 12:** I see a commitment from the educators here at this conference to engage and make this a really positive experience.

**Speaker 13:** I am really here to learn from everybody else that's why I came today.

**Speaker 14:** Edcamp is an effective, professional development. I can take what I've learnt today back to my school and use similar ideas in our own professional development.

**Speaker 15:** Our hope is the school districts across the nation will adopt the Edcamp model for professional development.

**Speaker 16:** Edcamp has provided opportunity for people to think and talk about their educational philosophy, attend something for nothing and come away with great ideas.

**Speaker 17:** I think that's really important.

So those are the videos from the very first Edcamp that we later edited and added a bunch of sound to hopefully make it sound a little bit fancier. After that very first Edcamp, something happened that I didn't really expect to happen. That night after the Edcamp was finished and we were all exhausted, we wrote a blog post and we said, hey we tried this thing, we put up a blank scheduled board, we invited lots of educators, we asked a bunch of questions and we had a really great day. We figured out the sessions on the morning of the day, we ran those sessions as conversations where everyone interacted and tried to answer the question as best as they could. We took some notes and, "Here you go world, this is what we learnt." I'll be honest, I really didn't expect anything to happen. And something started to happen.

## A growing movement

That very first year, we had eight Edcamps and we were stunned because we didn't think anybody else would actually think this was a good idea, but people started calling me and saying, "Hey, we want to have an Edcamp in New York, do we have to have permission to do that?" And I said, "You want to have an Edcamp in New York? That's so cool, you don't have to ask for permission, just go!"

It started to take off and we put a blog post and said, "you don't need permission, just go and ran an Edcamp." We actually ran what we called the blank schedule board challenge, where we actually encouraged people in their faculty meetings to put up a blank schedule board and instead of going through all the updates for their normal faculty meetings, can you ask questions and have people just group up around the questions they want to answer and talk?

After that first year when we had eight, the next year we had a couple or more and we even had one in Finland and we were pretty pumped about that. The next year there were even more and then more and then more and then more and now I've lost count. We have probably six or seven Edcamps every Saturday in the United States across the country. The main way that I know that they are going on, is because I follow the hashtag on Twitter. If you are interested and you are curious, what is it that people are talking about when they are at an Edcamp, check out that hashtag Edcamp, or checkout the hashtag Edcamp Philly, or check out the hashtag Edcamp NYC and you'll be able to see very quickly what kinds of conversations and what kinds of questions we're asking.

But the important thing I would say is that the questions we are asking might not be the questions that you have. You might have different challenges, you might have different ideas to explore and that's okay.

That's what makes this model so powerful. It's that it's customized and tailored to you.

And so after we had all of these Edcamps and after they started happening, I started to think well, "How could we bring these people together?" Because many of these Edcamps were happening just on their own and I didn't really know everyone who was running an Edcamp. And so we started to bring together this group called the Edcamp Foundation, and the purpose of the Edcamp Foundation is just to help Edcampers meet other Edcampers.

Sometimes we will meet ups where we bring together Edcampers from different parts of the world or different countries and sometimes we have video chats and we do all different sorts of events just to bring educators together because there is no worse feeling than being an educator and closing that door and being alone. We want to make sure that if there is an educator out there that needs that support, that there is some support there for them.

## Edcamps impact kids

The reason that this has worked is because Edcamps actually have an impact on kids. I know that there are a lot of different ways to improve your instruction. Absolutely there are, but for me when I talk with another educator who is tackling the same problems that I am, that's when I get the best ideas, that's when I get the insight, that's when I get the most excited.

For me we've seen a tremendous impact on students whose teachers are Edcampers and we're starting to study this and we're starting to go through experiments where we start to see what is the impact that this has and its very, very early and to be frank with you, there's more data that exists than we even know where it exists yet so we are trying to sort of bring all that together.

One of the most marked things that we noticed were that there were students who saw their teachers going to Edcamp and they asked to come along, they said, "We heard about this Edcamp thing, we heard that you think it is pretty cool, can we come?" The students went to the Edcamp and said, "Well, we are going to do this, but we are going to call it Stucamp." They started Stucamp because they said, you know we are the kids, if we want to make school better, we want get in on this too."

Now in addition to Edcamp we have Stucamps where kids come together and they talk about what they want to see in their classroom and this idea of student voice and student choice has really ignited a lot of schools where we are starting to see Stucamp take off. One of the most interesting things that we have seen, specifically in the state of Iowa, is that, when students in Iowa run a StuCamp, they not only run the StuCamp, but they run the Edcamp for the teachers.

They are the ones who bring together the invitations and manage the operations and actually run the event, and we get the best turn out there because people really want to come and participate in this conversation with their kids, and the community has come out, and they do a lot of interesting things. They often have sessions on Make Your Spaces, and you can see them building, and you can see them talking and sharing about what they want school to look like, because their voice is really, really important when we start to think about this change.

I'm hopeful that after hearing a little bit about Edcamps and hearing that you get to come in to a blank schedule board, offer up any idea, any question or any topic, and talk through those topics interactively with folks, that perhaps you too will want to give this a try. On October 18, we're having the very first Edcamp here in Barcelona. I think it will be the very first Edcamp in all of Spain. We have not had one in England yet, so this is definitely the first one sort of even in this region, and I couldn't be more excited about it.

Spread the word, I would love to have you come out and get your insight on how you are doing learning, how you are doing teaching, how you are interacting with your kids and also how we can make this crazy thing called Edcamp better, because everyone always has ideas, "What if we try this?" or "What if we did that?" that continue to make the model more robust, because this is something that you can bring to your schools, you can bring it to your faculty meetings. It's really a great way to get involved.

So why did this idea that was really just one crazy person, a.k.a. me, that was just one person's idea, why did it turn into hundreds of events? Well, I don't really know, but I have three guesses. The first is that we got really lucky. When I had this idea, and when I wrote that blog post, it was May of 2010, which was the same year that Twitter blew up. Teachers who previously didn't know how to find each other, started finding each other.

Teachers that didn't know how to connect to other people who were interested in the same topics that they were, all of a sudden had this new medium, and that probably one of the biggest factors as to why, this one

person with one idea to make one event turned into this international network of educators doing amazing things.

The second reason, I think, is because there was something going on in the United States at that time, a specific policy, you may be familiar with it, called No Child Left Behind. Under this particular policy, if you were a teacher as I was, you were under some pretty strict guidelines. It didn't really feel like you had a lot of choices as an educator at that time.

All we wanted was to make our own choices about what was important for learning for our kids because we knew them best, and we spend everyday with them. There was a strong need in our country at that time, specifically around moving towards innovation, moving towards new problems, and helping other people to see that we could be in control of our own learning, and that we could be in control of our own destiny as educators, and that we had a voice, we had a choice and we had a say.

The third piece was that, we trusted each other. We had built these relationships and these networks, and I trusted that if someone said to me, "I've tried this in my classroom and it works", that it was something that was going to have a positive impact on my kids, because around that time, I was also getting more and more technology into my classroom. There was some research on what to do with that technology, but most of the time we were figuring it out.

I remember opening it up the first chrome book and being like, "I don't even know how to use this thing, and there is no best practice research yet on how to use this thing with kids, so I'm going to just try and figure it out the best I can." I think we've come a long way since then. I think there are still so many new technical innovations in our classrooms, where we have a lot to learn, and the research is keeping up, but a lot of it, we still have to improvise and sort of make it as we go, if you will.

A couple of things, I shared with you a little bit about how we are social learners, as humans, and how we need to have agency over our learning for it to be really effective. For me, my journey took me to Twitter, to Edcamp, which now have brought me to all of you.

Whether you choose to engage in Edcamps or not, there are a couple of tips that I have for you, just around social learning and how to take your professional development and sort of bump it up to the next level.

*Share, the environment, experimentation and find your tribe*

The first is, don't be embarrassed to share. I used to be really embarrassed as a teacher to say, "I know this, I'm good at this", because I always thought, "Well, there must be someone out there who's better than me, there must be someone out there who knows more than I do." I didn't realize that I was passing up a tremendous opportunity to share my expertise, and to make my expertise greater by getting feedback from others, and getting information about how I could shape my learning. It's very common to be embarrassed, but don't be embarrassed, you always know more than you think you do.

The second one is focus on the environment, not specifically the content of the professional development. Make sure that the content is flexible, because you might get people in the room that want to sort of explore different avenues, and the more opportunities you can give people to explore by creating that open environment, the better it will be. Make it safe to ask questions. The content is critically important. The research is critically important, but if the environment is more open, everyone will receive that information better.

The third is embrace experiments. If you try something and it doesn't work, that's just the first attempt in learning. Some people say, "Well, that didn't work, it must not work." Instead say, "That didn't work, what's one thing we could change and try it again, and run a new experiment?" Really think about this with an experimental mindset. Just make small changes. Maybe you're not going to turn your faculty meeting into an Edcamp, but maybe you will just have people come up with many questions as they can for the last 10 minutes, and take some time to answer them. You can start very, very small with social learning.

The next thing is, find your tribe. If you feel isolated in your classroom, there are so many places where you can go to find people who are interested in the same things that you are, whether it be Twitter, whether it be Edcamps, whether it be just the networks that this foundation is bringing together. Find people and honestly you've probably found many of those people because that's why you're here, that's why you're interested, that's why you came out after a really long day in the classroom to spend time learning these kinds of things.

The last thing I would say is, share widely. You never know what idea you share that might touch someone else. I had no idea, a year ago when I was at Edcamp SF Bay in San Francisco, sharing in a session on Make Your Spaces, that Val was going to walk in and say, "Hey, I want to have an Edcamp in Barcelona and can you come? And can we have an Edcamp?" I had no idea that was going to happen. After I met Val, he said, "Oh, well I know this person, and this person and this person" and I had known them too. It was all because we were sharing widely. And because we were saying that, all of us are more important than any one of us when it comes to making learning better for kids.

I recognize that this is just one small piece of a much larger puzzle. Social learning is one small piece of school change. It's one small piece of innovation. There needs to be a lot of other things that go into this puzzle to complete it. There needs to be strong support from our government, strong support from our researchers, strong support from our communities, strong support from our parents. I think that this is a journey that we've only just started, but boy am I glad that I have other people now on my journey instead of it just being my journey alone.

Thank you for taking the time to join me on this journey. I hope that I'll get to meet some of you and I hope that all of you have found just a little bit of value hopefully and hearing from me, and it resonates with some of you and the journey that you are on. I'm very grateful to spend this time with you. I know that it's important time, it's time that you could be with your families or your children, and you have chosen instead

to spend it with me, and that is quite an honor. If you have any questions or you want to think about these things differently, or you just want to find out more or you just want to pose a question to me that maybe I hadn't considered, please do. I hope that this is just the beginning and not the end.

## Questions

*Why would I go to an Edcamp if I don't know what's going to be talked about?*

The biggest barrier that we face is getting people comfortable with the fact that they don't know what the day is going to be about. People will say, "How am I supposed to come if I don't know what the sessions are?" I would say that that getting people to just give it a try is probably the hardest part. What we've done there is we've tried half day. You'll come in at 9 and you'll be done at 11:30 and you can go have lunch. It's this much smaller commitment that people are willing to make. We have seen some Edcamps organized around specific topics. We do have Edcamp History, Edcamp Art. Edcamp literacy is another one. We found that for the first few times, it's better to keep it open just because you're recruiting from a much smaller pool of folks if you make it on a specific topic. Whereas if you just keep it open, what will end up happening is people tend to kind of organize into those groups anyway.

I think the conversation that was brought up about better camp and how do we extend that conversation is one that we are really grappling with right now. We have people who come together for a few hours. They start these conversations and then they actually want to work on them. We're trying different workshop models where people can actually just get together and work on a project that was born out of an Edcamp and we're calling them work camps.

There are different ways of approaching that. We found that when you do an Edcamp and there are a lot of people from your local community there, people will tend to continue to organize on different digital platforms in ways that they can continue to work on that, but I would say

that's probably the biggest thing that we're tackling. People have all of these great ideas. They come up with things that they want to do. How do we make the space for them to actually continue that work? We're really open to continuing that conversation.

*How are the sessions organized if the topics and attendance are open and free?*

We've seen it done in a couple of different ways. I think the most powerful way is that you have a morning social block. For example, at Edcamp Philly, we'll have from about 9 to about 9:40. That is also great because some people don't get there right on time and people can come in. We usually... we'll get some pastries or donuts and coffee. People will just mingle and chat. As that's happening, people will put ideas up on the board. We usually will get enough ideas to start the day but people can keep adding to that throughout the day.

We usually find that probably about 90 percent of the board is locked in place by about 9:40 and then we know what's going to happen for the rest of the time. It takes a little bit of getting used to with the post-its and making sure all the post-its are up there. It gets a little bit easier after you've done it once or twice, for sure.

*How are teachers encouraged to share their experiences?*

I think that it's just a different way of thinking. I think it's a different way of understanding the value that comes from just sharing different practices in the classroom. I found that teachers are more interested in peer learning when there's something that is so brand new. For example, Make Your Spaces were really brand new to some of the schools that I worked in. We didn't know what the right way to organize a Make Your Space was. Teachers were very interested in peer learning because they were so curious about what other teachers were doing on that particular topic. I think that if you find an innovative topic, sometimes people will be more

eager to embrace peer learning if they're a little bit nervous about it the get go.

### *A chaotic experience or organic creation?*

Do Edcamps feel messy? Do they feel chaotic? They can, a little bit at first. There is typically a lot of movement. There's a lot of conversations that happen. I think the number one thing that we try to do to help people with that is we actually have greeters. We'll have folks who come in and when people enter, we say, "So here's what today might look like. Here's what today might feel like."

### *How do you make people who are taking part for the first time feel comfortable?*

We also have folks who have worked or been to an Edcamp before or we tell them what Edcamps are to model some of the rule of two feet. "Hey this is a great conversation but I'm actually really interested in this other conversation. Thanks so much", and just sort of excusing themselves. We found that if there are a few people who are modeling some of these behaviors, it makes it a lot easier for other people to do the same. It helps people to make sure that they are getting what they need.

One of the other things that sounds simple, but is really important is the furniture in the room. If the furniture in the room is set up like this, people will all sit like this and expect someone to stand up there and talk. Whereas if the chairs are just in a small circle, people will sit in the small circle and talk to each other. We try to put as many of those small nudges in place so that it just does feel like a very casual conversation. That does help a lot.

*Does the US debate on education revolve around results and standards?*

I think that there is a very large dominant conversation about the standards and the code. I think, to be honest, what we see is this is to the side of that. This is for teachers who say, “Yes, we need to meet the standard code, but we’re here for kids. We’re not here for the code.” What are the things that my kids need right now? We tend to see conversations about different books. Right now, there’s been a big push in diversity in literature. A lot of the literature in the United States traditionally has been not very diverse. It doesn’t look like the kids who are coming into our classrooms.

We’ve had a lot of conversations about that. We’ve had a lot of conversations about getting kids building things at Make Your Spaces. I think we’re saying, “Yes, we know that meeting those codes is important, but I think that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.” To the point that you had raised about some of the bank statements. We can tally up all of the points in the system, but it’s... you can’t tally up points and have that be a child. We tend to see these conversations happening alongside those conversations. They look somewhat different, I find.

*Are Edcamps meetings on educational policy?*

To the point about is this just a place where educators come together to be against the government or the code. We actually don’t see that at all. I think that people who are willing to give of their time to come to an event like this, they really want the system and everything to get better. The only way to influence things and to make them get better is to bring everyone into the conversation. Every year in the United States, we have Edcamp US Department of Education.

It’s actually held in Washington DC with the policy makers. We bring in a bunch of teachers and a bunch of policy makers. We have both parties ask the questions and answer them together. We are trying to build a deeper understanding of what’s happening in classrooms and

connect that directly to the policy makers. Actually, just last year, Edcamps were actually written into the United States Educational Technology plan as one method that teachers could use to learn from each other. We're making small strides.

*Are the progressive education theories from Europe in the 1920s an important influence for Edcamps?*

The first thing I would say is that in many ways, some of the progressive teaching practices that are happening here are far beyond what is happening in some parts of the United States. You all work in places where I would feel very lucky and privileged to work because there are some amazing things happening. I think that the Unconferences here have been very popular for a very long time. Unconferences have only recently become popular in the United States.

For educators, the only difference between an Unconference and an Edcamp is that the sessions for an Edcamp have to be built on the day of the event. The only reason that we put that in place was because we didn't want people to make it... we wanted it to feel more informal.

*Why is Edcamp not happening in Latin American countries?*

I think that we have a lot of work to do. We haven't been to, spread to all of the places that we'd like to. We do have an Edcamp in Mexico City that's actually happening next month. It's happening. It's just not happening as fast as we would like.

*How is it applied in classrooms? Is there a noticeable effect?*

I think that we need to do a lot more work to study the impact that this has on teachers and the impact that this has on students. It's also very hard to separate, "Is this the impact of the Edcamp?" "Is this the impact

of some other program?” “Is this the impact of the curriculum?” Sometimes, when you’re saying, “What happens to a student learning?” There are a lot of conflicting variables in there. I think that we still have a lot of work to do to be really responsive in that area. I think it’s something that we would hope we start to see come out of this. Early findings that we have is we start to... we have started to compile all of the reflections of things that teachers have implemented in their classrooms that they learned at Edcamps.

We’re starting to see some strong qualitative themes come out of that around student voice and student choice, which is something that sounds like many schools here are embracing, but is also very, very new and very difficult for some of the places in the United States, for sure. To the point of the person who raised the point about the baby chicks, that was absolutely true. The school that I was working at was on a farm, and so we actually got to take them to the farm in the back after that. We did have a very unique situation there. It was in very rural Pennsylvania.

I don’t know if you’ve ever heard of Amish country, but there were a bunch of Amish farms there that brought the chicks in. We wouldn’t. I would not be able to do that in the city. That’s for sure. It would be a very different, different environment.

### *What is its impact on teachers’ professional development?*

We have two strong findings thus far, and I wouldn’t say that either of them are causal, I think they’re just related. The first thing we find is that teachers who are involved in Edcamp, who are either Edcamp leaders or attend a lot of Edcamps, tend to stay in the profession longer.

In the United States, we find that most teachers stay in the profession for about three to five years, and then they move on and they find another job. That’s partially because of the wages that are provided to teachers, it’s partially because, as you know, teaching is a very tough job, and so by giving people the opportunity to connect with other people they have said that they have chosen to stay in the profession longer.

Now, I don't think Edcamps have caused that, but I think that we're seeing a strong relationship between those two factors.

That is one finding that we have started to dig into around teachers and professional development. The other thing around teacher and professional development is the perceived value. In the United States, we have a system by which teachers have to take a certain number of hours of professional development every year to maintain their certification, and we've done a study where we asked people, "Which experiences did you find most valuable?"

We've done that study with hundreds of educators and we always find that Edcamps are either number one or number two for folks that have attended an Edcamp. That's perceived value. Now, we actually need to go out and start to look at their practices in their classrooms and measure the actual value, because that's just the first step. Right now, we have a new program, we're calling it The Edcamp Grant Program where people who come up with an idea for implementing or changing their instruction at an Edcamp, actually write about it. If they need some materials, we provide those materials for them and then we're actually going to measure the impact that that has had on their classroom and we're going to see how that goes. That's currently in progress right now.

We have about another year of that study until we will know anything conclusive, there's a lot more research that we have to do to be really responsible about how we use this.

### *What do the public sector bodies think about it?*

I think that, as far as administrators at Edcamp, we have seen that many of them are our biggest champions, because they love this idea of having active learning at their faculty meetings and other things like that.

They also love the idea of, some of the teachers who might be doing great things in their classroom, that other teachers don't get to see because they're in their own classroom, start to spread not only across their school, but maybe across several schools. We've seen them be really supportive of this model because it's something that they can do,

that they can easily scale, they don't need any special permission or something special. They can just decide to do this if that's something that they want to do.

*What can cause Edcamps to fail?*

I think there are two things that can cause Edcamps to fail. One is over-planning it. I've seen people who go, "I'm very afraid that no-one will put anything up on the board, and so I'm going to schedule the whole board ahead of time," and then it just doesn't work, it loses that excitement. The second thing I've seen that causes Edcamps to fail is when people come in and they don't know what to expect.

I think that people that come in and they don't know what to expect, the more you can educate them and help them feel comfortable in that first 15 minutes to half hour, will actually change the whole day and how the whole day feels. If you can make sure that you have a lot of folks on hand to explain what's going on to new folks in that first hour, it can make a big difference as to the rest of the day and how the sessions actually go.

## About the author

Kristen Swanson is Director of Learning at *Slack*, she is one of the founding members of the Edcamp movement and current member of the *Edcamp* Foundation Board. She also worked at *BrightBytes*, an online research platform to analyse actions that improve learning and reaches 10 million students around the world, where she is responsible for professional learning.

Swanson has taught at elementary level, has been regional consultant for *Response to Intervention*, has worked as an educational technology director for a public school district in Pennsylvania, and has developed curriculum together with Dr Grant Wiggins of *Understanding by Design*.

Moreover, she is also a prolific author and blogger and is passionate about sharing the organic learning message. She has been invited to share her ideas at the ASCD conference, TEDxPhiladelphiaEd, TEDxNYED, EDUCON, and many other events.

She holds a bachelor's degree from DeSales University, two master's degrees from Wilkes University, and a doctoral degree in Education from Widener University. She now lives in San Francisco.

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