

47 United States and Ukraine: Virtual Edcamps

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Type of intervention: non-governmental (digital promise)

Website: www.edcamp.org | www.edcamp.org.ua

General description

The Edcamp model is built on the idea that teachers can learn from and inspire one another to enhance their professional skills with the goal of improving student outcomes. Edcamps are a participatory professional development event organised by teacher volunteers in which educators lead their own learning experiences. Edcamps adopt the “unconference” model where sessions are organised, structured and led by the people attending the event. Edcamps facilitate peer-to-peer learning among teachers, and as teachers are on the frontline of solving the new challenges of emergency distance learning as well as planning for ongoing changes to teaching and learning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, best practices can spread more quickly if teachers are given opportunities to share them with each other.

The Edcamp movement originated in 2010 with an in-person event in the United States organised by and for teachers. Ten years later, more than 500 Edcamps occur each year all around the world. Anyone can organise an Edcamp. For example, in the United States, Digital Promise, a US-based non-governmental organisation supports the Edcamp Community.

Edcamps are cost effective, scalable and easily replicable. Organised and attended by educators in 43 countries around the world, Edcamps’ value comes from teachers collaborating and learning together through conversations and shared experiences, rather than one-to-many professional development presentations. Research has found that teachers who choose all or most of their professional learning

opportunities are more than twice as satisfied with professional development as those with fewer options (Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, 2015^[1]).

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, many Edcamps have been hosted entirely on line to support the new and urgent needs of educators. Since March 2020, dozens of online Edcamps have supported tens of thousands of teachers to learn about and share their experiences with teaching remotely during the COVID-19 crisis. [Edcamp Ukraine](#) successfully hosted the national online Edcamp, “High Five for Education” on 13-20 April 2020. In the United States, [Digital Promise](#) hosted a series of online Edcamps from April to June 2020, collectively titled “Edcamp: Powerful Learning at Home”.

Main problems addressed

Supporting teachers. Since the COVID-19 pandemic forced school closures, educators around the world have been attempting to provide continued learning for students by teaching remotely. In addition to the challenges of no longer having the structure of a classroom setting and face-to-face interactions with students and colleagues, teachers must now rely much more on technology to engage students and provide remote classroom learning. For some teachers, this transition has been manageable because of their prior experiences teaching with technology. However, many teachers are struggling with learning new technology tools, engaging students remotely, collaborating with overwhelmed parents, maintaining professional learning networks, and addressing issues of equity and access for their students.

Rapid sharing of ideas and techniques for distance learning. Emergency distance learning is a challenge for which there are no existing best practices. The challenges and implementation models for this unique situation are very different from planned models of online or blended learning, and therefore teachers have been in a position to lead in developing for themselves the new techniques to make this difficult learning experience as successful as possible. Edcamps are different from the way much professional learning is designed; that is, by outside “experts” observing, documenting, reporting and designing training. Instead, rapidly organised online Edcamps provide a venue for new ideas and techniques to spread from teacher to teacher, at a speed necessary to address the rapid changes in teaching and learning taking place around the world.

Valuing teacher knowledge and giving teachers control of their professional development. Face-to-face Edcamps are already a form of teacher professional development that is cost effective, scalable and replicable in support of teachers’ learning and growth. The intention is that attendees connect with like-minded peers and are all treated as professionals who have something valuable to contribute to the conversation – from pre-service teachers who are just learning their skills to veteran educators who have wrestled with persistent challenges for decades. Adapting the Edcamp model to a virtual format makes it even more cost-efficient, while providing educators with most of the continued benefits of collaborative participant-driven, teacher-to-teacher learning and networking. The aim remains to enhance pedagogical skills and improve practice and to provide teachers with more control over their professional learning to increase job satisfaction, retention and engagement in leadership opportunities.

Mobilising and developing resources

At the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, many Edcamp organisers were forced to postpone and cancel their events. However, as the scale of the crisis became more apparent, organisers began to explore the possibility of hosting Edcamps on line. The existing resources Edcamp organisers could mobilise were the Edcamp idea, as well as the network of the Edcamp Community.

New resources were developed to support the continuation of Edcamps on line.

Free guides and resources available on the [Edcamp Community website](#) were developed to implement the Edcamp model on line, based on the revision of existing resources to provide additional guidance for organisers of online Edcamps. Edcamps can be held on line using many widely available videoconferencing tools such as Zoom, Google Meet or Microsoft Teams, with careful co-ordination required to support the selection of topics for workshop sessions, align participants to the topics they choose and ensure all sessions have volunteer moderators to facilitate discussions. The “breakout room” features available on some videoconference platforms have proven particularly valuable in separating groups of teachers into smaller more manageable groups to discuss the most popular topics. A list of dates and information for virtual Edcamps has also been added to the Edcamp Community website.

To model and promote the growth of online Edcamps, US-based non-governmental organisation Digital Promise organised a series of virtual Edcamps for teachers in the United States (some teachers from outside the United States also attended) as part of its supporting role to the Edcamp Community. These virtual Edcamps were very well attended. In each of these events, the Digital Promise team tested variations on registration, organising breakout sessions within conferencing platforms and other technical implementation tactics to be used to inform the new guidance being shared with the Edcamp Community for hosting their own online Edcamps.

Edcamp Ukraine, which organises Edcamps in Ukraine, also moved quickly to implement an online Edcamp at the national level. Leveraging previous experience using the “MyOwnConference” webinar platform and the “Attendify” event app proved to be an asset, although adaptation and upscaling to a much larger audience were considerable challenges that required additional testing and increased planning for security and accessibility.

Fostering effective use and learning

Meeting teachers’ immediate learning needs. Edcamps can be arranged on any topic and can be launched in a matter of only a few weeks, making this model effective for supporting immediate learning needs in an ongoing way, even in an uncertain and rapidly changing environment. The “unconference” model eases teachers’ effective learning as participating teachers choose themselves what and how they would like to learn from their peers.

Follow-up events to consolidate and improve learning. Beyond the event itself, follow-up events are organised to make the Edcamp learning process a professional learning journey. For example, Edcamp Ukraine’s High Five for Education, a session led by Esther Wojcicki at the April 2020 conference, introduced participants to the concept of the “Three Rings of COVID-19: The Fear Zone, the Learning Zone and the Growth Zone.” Throughout the five-day online Edcamp, participants moved through all three zones. Educators were encouraged to design their own learning experience through five steps of growth through the participant-driven agenda-setting session at the opening conference. These journeys and the additional learning needs they brought to the surface inspired an additional series of follow-up events (called the “Toloka” series) to maintain the teachers’ motivation to further improve their attitudes and skills.

Implementation challenges

Organising an Edcamp can produce anxiety because the model leaves so much up to the participants. Before the virtual Edcamp in Ukraine, organisers expected implementation challenges first fearing an unusually low number of participants, then – after applications rose sharply – fearing technical issues as a result of an unusually high number of participants. They successfully mitigated this risk by establishing a 24-hour support line with partners.

Another challenge concerned the computer and Internet literacy of the participating teachers, which was mitigated through detailed instructions that were sent out beforehand.

The main challenges faced in organising the US-based Edcamp were related to the limitations of videoconferencing tools. These implementation challenges and mitigation strategies are listed below:

- **Managing numbers of participants and sessions.** Typically, Edcamps offer participants multiple topics per session. This online Edcamp offered two sessions that each contained three to four topics. (This gives participants the choice to join two of six to eight possible session topics.) To provide enough session topics, a corresponding number of Zoom meeting rooms were needed, each hosted by a different organiser. This challenge was mitigated by lowering the number of session topics available to three per session. However, this challenge could also be mitigated by offering one topic per session if there is only one person organising the Edcamp.
- **Facilitating multiple discussions.** Once participants are in their video conference meeting rooms, the facilitator will place them into breakout rooms. Typically, 8-12 participants are placed in a single breakout room, and with anywhere from 100-300 participants per session, there could be more than 30 breakout rooms. With so many breakout rooms, the facilitator cannot be in all the rooms at all times, meaning participants need to drive the discussion on their own. Participants were asked to volunteer as breakout room moderators and were provided a guide on best practices for moderating virtual meetings.
- **Recording multiple discussions.** Due to the nature of the breakout room set up, it could not be guaranteed that notes were taken to record everything discussed in each room. Thus, public online collaborative whiteboards were created that anyone could access to share notes and resources from their discussions, centralising notes on each topic across multiple smaller discussions (tools such as Padlet, Miro, Limnu or others can be used for this).
- **Managing the registration process.** Successfully managing the registration process is an additional potential implementation challenge for organisers. For example, Digital Promise used the resources of an e-service called “Eventbrite” to handle registration and contact with participants using just one platform. However, participants still needed to register for a Zoom room after they registered on Eventbrite for the Edcamp. While hosting registration on Eventbrite and hosting the event on Zoom is not a perfect system, it did help communicate with participants more efficiently.

Monitoring success

Virtual Edcamps have the potential to reach many more educators than in-person local Edcamps. In the two countries where large-scale virtual Edcamps were held, Ukraine and the United States, these events reached tens of thousands of educators. For 5 days, Edcamp Ukraine engaged over 10 000 educators across Ukraine, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia and Moldova. In the United States, Digital Promise hosted a series of online Edcamps reaching over 3 000 educators across the country. Other local Edcamp organisers have hosted at least 20 virtual Edcamps in the United States, which collectively reached approximately 4 200 educators.

Edcamp organisers seek feedback from their participants, typically in the form of post-event surveys. After Edcamp Ukraine, feedback forms returned by participants provided significant data on the success of the initiative relating to the educators’ professional development, in particular the usefulness of the content, changes in attitudes and skills, and the interactivity of the sessions were highly rated by participants. Edcamp Ukraine received positive feedback regarding the rich content of the events, the close connection to like-minded (and sometimes dissenting) people, the question and answer session with decision makers and researchers, the interactivity, the comfort of being able to learn at home, and the published recordings (more than 6 600 subscribers on YouTube).

Digital Promise's online Edcamps participant surveys indicated that teachers desired and appreciated opportunities to share common concerns and learn from one another. A participating teacher from the United States identified the value of connecting with peers in the Edcamp format, saying "Talking and asking questions of other teachers and knowing I am having some of the same problems was what I needed to be motivated to keep trying. I am not alone, and I needed help. Many of the tech programs were very helpful and the fact that the other teachers explained how they used them was very helpful. I am not as skilled in the use of tech but now I am not afraid."

Adaptability to new contexts

Flexible and low cost. The flexibility of the Edcamp model makes it available in any context. While in-person events remain restricted due to the pandemic, the online model for hosting Edcamps can be viable in any context in which teachers have access to the tools and bandwidth required for videoconferencing. Because this model relies on the accumulated skills and wisdom of teachers themselves, resources can be directed to facilitation, logistics and communication rather than paying presenters.

Can be scaled and organised at grassroots and national levels. Edcamps can and do scale very quickly once implemented. The entire Edcamp movement originated with a single in-person event in the United States organised by and for teachers. Ten years later, more than 500 Edcamps occur each year all around the world. As in-person events became restricted, the pivot to online events happened quickly both in terms of the national level online Edcamps highlighted previously that took place in the United States and Ukraine, and grassroots organised online Edcamps that have also emerged, with at least 20 being hosted in the first 3 months of the crisis.

International reach. The organisers in Ukraine invited participants from the Edcamp movements in five EU Eastern Partnership countries to their April 2020 event. After this event, they provided consulting support for these neighbouring Edcamp movements, particularly in Belarus. An additional event to target teacher communities in the five countries (with an inter-ministerial component) is currently being prepared. Additionally, the above-mentioned "Toloka" events ("*toloka*" being a Ukrainian term for communal work and mutual, neighbourly aid) represent the "long tail effect" of the April 2020 conference, scaling up its impact. The "Toloka" events are interactive webinars in the same style as Edcamps and take place every six weeks. The first "Toloka" event was on 1 June 2020 and attracted 6 000 participants.

As the world emerges from the COVID-19 crisis, Edcamps can be an effective and scalable way for teachers to learn from one another and the dual modalities of in-person and online events are likely to continue alongside each other.

Box 47.1. Key points to keep in mind for a successful adaptation

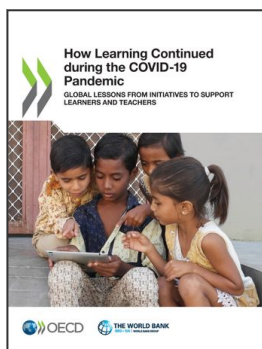
1. Anyone can organise an Edcamp. It does not require a lot of money or resources. However, it requires dedication and time on part of the organisers to select a date, a location or a digital platform; create an organising team; and build an audience.
2. An online Edcamp will need organisers to consider most of the other planning steps outlined in the [Organiser Handbook](#) apart from securing a physical distance.
3. Virtual Edcamps can be a single event or spread across multiple days or weeks. Be clear about your start/end times – and time zones – to help participants plan ahead.
4. Be clear about whether your Edcamp is planned for people in your district or region or will be open to educators everywhere. Since there is no travel time or costs involved, educators from anywhere can attend a virtual Edcamp. Make your intended audience clear in the registration details and other communications such as social media, to set expectations appropriately.
5. Create a digital session board in advance and be prepared to host multiple sessions at once. Traditional in-person Edcamps begin by creating their session board together at the start of the day. But for a virtual Edcamp, topics can be collected in advance – at the point of registration, for example – by using Google Forms or other software. Compile your session board in a shared document or file and list the teleconference links for each session so attendees are able to leave a session and find a different session, where needed, to maximise their learning.
6. Use breakout rooms and recruit moderators for each session. A popular structure is to bring participants together in a shared online space first for a welcome message or video, then divide into separate digital areas by topic. You can also use breakout rooms to place attendees into smaller groups, either randomly or by affinity (e.g. grade level). Recruit moderators for each session room in advance and prepare them ahead of time to assist with conversations. Consider equipping them with three to five icebreaker questions to start conversations if needed.
7. Use any teleconference software and supplement your teleconference conversation with “slow chat”. You can use any teleconference software such as Zoom or Google Hangouts to bring participants together. “Eventbrite” does, for example, offer a section for live streaming or webinar event, providing a single platform for registering and meeting with participants. Check if your preferred platform offers closed captioning, which can improve accessibility and reduce online fatigue. Supplement your teleconference conversation with “slow chat” software like Fligrd, Padlet or Jamboard so attendees can share ideas, resources and feedback.

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Oleksandr Elkin and Elyse Gainor.

References

- Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation (2015), *Annual report 2015*, [1]
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From:
How Learning Continued during the COVID-19 Pandemic
Global Lessons from Initiatives to Support Learners and Teachers

Access the complete publication at:

<https://doi.org/10.1787/bbeca162-en>

Please cite this chapter as:

Modica, Allison (2022), "United States and Ukraine: Virtual Edcamps", in Stéphan Vincent-Lancrin, Cristóbal Cobo Romaní and Fernando Reimers (eds.), *How Learning Continued during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Global Lessons from Initiatives to Support Learners and Teachers*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1787/c7c91e94-en>

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