



*New modes of professional learning
put educators in the driver's seat.*



Jeffrey P. Carpenter

In 2012, when English teacher Andrew Thomasson became curious about flipped learning, no one at his North Carolina high school shared his interest. A handful of YouTube videos and blog posts whetted his appetite, but where to go next? His district offered no workshops on flipped learning, and the first book on the topic had yet to be published.

So Thomasson turned to Twitter, where he met Cheryl Morris, a California English teacher also interested in flipping. Together Thomasson and Morris began a rich collaboration that has included regular video conferences and the cocreation of curriculum materials, conference presentations, and a weekly #flipclass Twitter chat that they moderate for educators.

Similar stories of teachers taking charge of their professional growth are becoming increasingly common. Such self-directed learning contrasts with traditional professional development (PD), which has often been something done *to* teachers. In conventional PD, outside experts typically transmit knowledge to largely passive teacher audiences.

With self-guided modes, teachers take an active role in their learning. These methods recognize that teachers can develop practice-based expertise and play leadership roles as they advance their profession. Such approaches are based on principles of adult learning and assume that teachers

- must be involved in their learning process;
- need to consider a myriad of factors related to classroom and community context;
- can use prior classroom experiences as potential resources for learning;

■ seek learning that helps them solve immediate problems.

Teacher-powered professional development takes many forms and has existed for decades. For example, the National Writing Project, Lesson Study, and Critical Friends Groups have for years engaged teachers as leaders and agents of reform. Until recently, however, relatively few teachers had access to such programs. Now, technology has made self-directed learning more widely available.

Powerful Learning Spaces

When people think of social media, they don't typically first associate it with professional learning. But many educators have realized that these media do not just meet the needs of students, celebrities, and brands. Social media facilitates participation, challenges hierarchies, and helps build professional networks that support teacher collaboration and autonomy. My research with colleague Dan Krutka suggests that social media provides opportunities to share classroom-tested resources and connect with new colleagues in other locations (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014a).

Take Twitter, for instance. Many teachers participate in some of the more than 200 weekly Twitter chats that allow educators to discuss topics of shared interest (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014b). Teachers report that they view Twitter as a space of professional invigoration, where their ideas matter and their voices are heard (Carpenter & Krutka, 2014a).

Twitter is far from the only source of online professional learning. Some teachers who sign up for services such as Pinterest or Instagram for nonprofessional reasons eventually recognize their



benefit the majority of teachers (Ferriter & Provenzano, 2013). Given the ubiquitous nature of social media, PD is at teachers' fingertips at almost all times. Educators can scratch a professional itch when it arises, instead of having to wait months for a conference.

Educators as Motivated Learners

Teachers are energized as learners when they're given opportunities to direct their own professional growth. In my Edcamp research, numerous participants praised the mood or emotional environment of the event, describing the "passion," "enthusiasm," and "excitement" they witnessed (Carpenter, 2015). One teacher wrote, "Participant engagement goes beyond anything seen at more traditional conferences" (p. 89).

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Expanded Pool of Potential Colleagues

An irony of the working lives of educators is that although they spend much of the school day surrounded by other people, they often work in isolation. Social media has knocked down some of the walls. Teachers are no longer limited to interacting with the small pool of colleagues in their school or district. Indeed, a recent survey of 20,000 U.S. teachers found that 57 percent of respondents used technology to connect with educators with whom they wouldn't otherwise have had the opportunity to collaborate (Scholastic, 2014).

Such interactions provide multiple benefits. Teachers can find peers who disrupt the siloed thinking of their particular context, expediting the spread of innovative practices. In both my Edcamp and social media research, participants have regularly praised the perspectives they gain in these spaces. For increasing numbers of educators, professional learning networks—built through formal programs in their districts and informal collaborations online—have become an irreplaceable part of their working lives and professional growth. They find it just as natural to talk shop with colleagues across the globe as they do with teachers down the hall.

ADVICE TO MYSELF AS A FIRST-YEAR TEACHER

"I don't know."

Don't be afraid to say that, Dave.

As a new teacher, you want to maintain an air of professionalism, competence, and expertise, but there's a lesson in those words for everyone in class. It's simply this: I'm a lifelong learner and you, students, should be as well.

Share with your students the things you're learning as you read, play sports, and interact with parents, students, and fellow educators. Tell those kids how everyone's brain has a capacity for learning—a capacity that none of us can even come close to filling.

In the end, you'll teach a lesson in humility. Your kids live in a world of over-inflated egos, where social media cries out, "Look at me! I'm special and better than you!" So separate yourself from the masses and say, "I guess I'm ignorant in that area, but I bet I can find the answer, and I can't wait to see what it is!"

—David Seidman, head of school,
Hawthorne Christian Academy, Hawthorne, New Jersey

Increased Leadership Opportunities

Self-directed professional development is teacher-powered—and can also be teacher empowering. Although formal teacher leadership roles are limited in schools, leadership opportunities abound online and at Edcamps. Teacher-powered PD taps into new, rich veins of leadership and gives teachers a platform to make their voices heard.

Great teachers who, in the past, might have had a primarily local impact now have a chance to leave their mark on their profession. In fact, some teachers who actively use Twitter have thousands of followers. Consider Wisconsin middle school English language arts educator Pernille Ripp. In 2010, as a third-year teacher, she was inspired by a story she heard about a virtual book club. She wrote a blog post suggesting that classrooms across the globe read and discuss a common book. The first Global Read Aloud was



born. It began with only 150 students, but thanks to the power of social media, just five years later more than one million students from 60 countries have participated (Ripp, n.d.). Before the rise of social media, it's hard to imagine that an early-career teacher's good idea could spread so quickly and become such a successful project.

The Challenges

The potential benefits of teacher-powered professional learning are enticing, but there are obstacles, too.

Starting Out

For the uninitiated, the world of Edcamps and social media can be baffling. Educators must learn new jargon and embrace new technologies. Questions naturally arise: After I sign up for a Twitter account, how do I find other tweeting educators? If an Edcamp's topics are decided the morning of the event, how do I know any of them will interest me?

Fortunately, there are multiple entry points to teacher-powered PD. Is Twitter too overwhelming? See whether the threaded conversations in Edmodo communities are more manageable. Is the technology daunting? Attend a face-to-face Edcamp where you'll likely find a session or social media enthusiast to help you start out. Because of the voluntary nature of these learning spaces, many participants are welcoming and willing to help.

Vet Your Own Content

The social media landscape has few gatekeepers, and the costs of participation are low. Such openness encourages teachers to share their experiences, but it also means that anyone—regardless of qualification or motive—can spread ideas about teaching and learning. This

reality requires educators to be both thoughtful producers and consumers. Teachers need to be mindful of the claims they make online. They also need to keep an eye out for others peddling vague generalizations or education fads, such as those that extol educational technologies that may or may not be useful in their own teaching practice.

Ideological Silos

Some critics say that Edcamps and social media allow teachers to surround themselves with people and ideas that reinforce their existing beliefs. Although these new forms of

When differing opinions or challenging topics arise, online communities offer a unique “out.” Teachers can simply disengage by unfriending or unfollowing a virtual colleague.



PD can, in theory, expose educators to diverse perspectives, some educators may use these spaces to seek out only like-minded peers. Traditional geographical silos that have limited teachers' access to new ideas can be easily replaced by ideological ones.

For instance, some teachers establish narrow Twitter networks that lack the variety of educators necessary to experience powerful moments of cognitive dissonance. Given the diverse populations and needs of our schools, educators should be conscious of their professional learning network's composition and ensure that their self-directed learning exposes them to perspectives that challenge their thinking.

Difficult Conversations

New avenues of professional development mitigate some challenges to collaboration, but they don't address them all. When differing opinions or challenging topics arise, online communities offer a unique “out.” Teachers can simply disengage by unfriending or unfollowing a virtual colleague—rather than pushing through difficult conversations that could lead to growth. For collaboration to be healthy, here's a rule of thumb: Listen and read at least as much as you speak and post.

When users are willing to work through impasses, they can arrive

at beneficial discussions about challenging topics. In the wake of events in Ferguson, Missouri, and Charleston, South Carolina, educators used the hashtags #fergusonsyllabus and #charlestonsyllabus to share ideas about how they could help students process and respond to the news. The #fergusonsyllabus hashtag even resulted in the organic, collaborative creation of a widely shared Google doc (<http://bit.ly/FergusonSyllabus>), which includes crowdsourced teaching materials.

Misalignment with School and District Goals

Past research has emphasized that professional development should be coherent with ongoing school initia-



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tives and mandates (Garet, Porter, Desimone, Birman, & Yoon, 2001). It's reasonable to question whether self-directed PD features such coherence. With Edcamps and social media, teachers can get frustrating glimpses of innovative practices that they are unable to implement in their own schools. Similarly, school leaders may be concerned that teacher-powered PD doesn't match district priorities. What will happen if teachers spend their professional learning energy on practices that don't align with district goals?

Yes, new approaches to PD expose teachers to ideas and practices that don't exist within their school or district. But that's the point. Teachers can still grow professionally even if they cannot immediately implement everything they learn in the context of their current work. In my research, issues of coherence and alignment have not proven to be of particular concern to participants. It may be that the teachers in these spaces have found it possible to balance their individual interests with their schools' goals.

Elevating the Profession

Teachers should be among the most highly motivated professional learners. Instead, professional development has often elicited significant cynicism and even bitterness. For too long, U.S. teachers have lacked access to PD that engages them in learning and allows them to share their expertise. Clearly, we need to explore new models. Research on social media and Edcamps

suggests potential benefits and indicates teachers' interest in collaborative and participatory PD. In an era of intense demands on educators, it's worth noting that teachers are willing to give up their personal time to participate in this unremunerated professional learning.

Whether a larger number of teachers engage in teacher-powered PD may depend on administrators. Principals, superintendents, and policymakers could view grassroots approaches to professional learning as threatening. But districts should understand that new forms of PD are not inevitably contrary to their agendas. An increase in self-directed professional learning does not mean that all traditional PD will disappear. The unconference probably will not kill the conference. As Kristen Swanson, coleader of the first Edcamp, has suggested, self-directed PD will likely become "one component of a balanced professional learning diet" (2014, p. 40). Teachers who participate in Edcamps and social media are often invigorated by such experiences and ultimately seek out even more professional learning.

Administrators should consider how they can encourage and harness self-directed learning among their faculty, without introducing so many constraints that the experiences are no longer teacher-owned. For instance, some district policies dictate what counts for continuing education credit. More inclusive definitions should encompass informal, teacher-driven

efforts. If education leaders embrace and support teacher-powered PD, teachers will have more opportunities not only to be active in their professional development, but also to shape the development of their profession. **EL**

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