

EDUCATION TRENDS

Promoting Playful Learning Through Teacher Networks

Through Edcamps and the ScratchED community, teachers can become champions of the kind of playful learning that will help their students thrive.

By *Philipp Schmidt*

March 20, 2015



When we hear the term playful learning, our minds often picture groups of children tinkering with new ideas, sharing their work with each other, and having a lot of fun in the process. But adults love to be playful, take risks, and experiment with new ideas just as much as children do. This is the reason why creating opportunities for adults to support each other as playful learners is a successful strategy to increase playful learning opportunities for children.

The term "adult" is very broad, and many types of adults -- parents, grandparents, mentors -- play important roles in a child's life. In this post, I will focus on a particular type of adult: teachers.

Peer Support Networks



Subscribe to *Edutopia Weekly*

Get our essential newsletter featuring must-read articles on the education topics that matter to you—it's personalized and delivered every Wednesday.

[Sign up for free](#) ([/account/signup?grades=&subscribe=weeklyNewsletter](#))

Teachers have a crucial but often very difficult role. At least in the U.S., they are increasingly expected to prepare students to do well on a set of standardized tests. Not only are the students being evaluated, but the teachers' careers and salaries depend on these scores as well. In such an environment, playful learning can seem like a distraction, at odds with the pressure to deliver better results. And yet, many good teachers know that taking risks, experimenting, and not being afraid to fail and try again are some of the most important aspects of good learning for their students.

This is where peer-support networks come in. Especially for the most innovative teachers, who may feel isolated in their schools, connecting with peers in other schools provides the support they need to experiment and embrace innovation. Through these networks, new playful learning approaches can spread to other schools. There are countless examples, but two stand out: the Edcamp movement of educator unconferences; and the ScratchED online community for teachers who use Scratch in their classrooms.

Happy Campers

Edcamps (<http://edcamp.org/>) are face-to-face workshops in which teachers share stories, experiences, lesson plans, or new ideas with each other. They are open to everyone, there's no registration, and participants volunteer to host breakout sessions on topics they are interested in -- for example, how to best use technology in the classroom or how to allow students to take charge of their own learning. Edcamps are spreading across the U.S. and internationally, but growing a face-to-face movement takes time. My team at the MIT Media Lab has collaborated with Edcamps on two virtual events, essentially moving the Edcamp model online. The response has been terrific. The two virtual Edcamps spawned 15 face-to-face events, and more than 85 percent of participants found it a good alternative to the more traditional professional development opportunities they are used to. And most importantly, online events can serve to recruit more organizers who start local Edcamps in their communities.

Learning From Scratch

ScratchED (<http://scratched.gse.harvard.edu/>) is another example of peer-to-peer learning as a powerful strategy for introducing new ideas into school system. *Scratch* (<http://scratch.mit.edu/>) is an online community where kids use visual "programming blocks" to learn coding by telling stories and expressing themselves creatively. It has been a huge success, and more than seven million Scratch projects have been created to date. Scratch is a valuable tool for kids to think and create, but introducing Scratch to into their already busy lesson plans isn't always straightforward for teachers. However, ScratchED helps teachers get started by providing example lesson plans and curriculum support materials. It also connects teachers with each other, enabling them to start projects together or translate

documents. Some teachers have specific questions, such as, "How are costumes different from sprites?" or "Can someone help me with variables?" Others want to share and discuss materials they've created (for example, "I developed an assessment that I'd like feedback on").

The interplay between the online ScratchEd interactions (i.e., the online community) and the face-to-face ScratchEd interactions (i.e., the monthly educators' meet-ups) is particularly interesting. Teachers find activities in the online community, try them out in local meet-ups with other teachers, remix them for their specific contexts, and then share their experiences both online and in person. Aside from sharing tips and best practices, the feeling of being part of a community of likeminded innovators, and having access to help when needed, might be the most important benefit for teachers.

How to Become a Playful Learning Champion

One reason for the success of peer-learning communities is that nobody has to wait for permission to get started. We talk a lot about students needing to feel ownership of their learning, but the same is true for teachers. In my experience of working with different communities of teachers all over the U.S., I have seen a tremendous amount of expertise, commitment, and very hard work, often with little recognition. Peer-to-peer communities remove some of the burden of having to deal with daily restrictions and guidelines, and allow teachers to be playful learners themselves. Groups like Edcamp and ScratchED provide a welcoming space for current and future champions of playful learning.

Here are two suggestions to get started with peer-to-peer learning:

1. *Find an Edcamp that's happening near you* (<https://www.edcamp.org/>), or host one yourself. It's easy!
2. *Join the ScratchED community* (<http://scratched.gse.harvard.edu/index.html>) and try out Scratch with your kids and friends.

(By the way, both are open to parents as well!)

Here are some additional resources:

- *Why Edcamp?* ([/blog/why-edcamp-kristen-swanson](http://blog/why-edcamp-kristen-swanson))
- *ScratchED: Developing support for educators as designers* (http://web.media.mit.edu/~kbrennan/files/Brennan_ScratchEd_Meetups.pdf) (PDF, 1.7MB)

Please share your own peer-to-peer learning experiences in the comments below.

Editor's Note: This post is inspired by one of the eight patterns appearing in educators' innovative approaches in the Future of Learning (<http://www.changemakers.com/play2learn#innovationmapping>) *report, "Equipping Adults to be Changemakers in Learning," by Ashoka* (<https://startempathy.org/changemaker-schools/>) *and the LEGO Foundation* (<http://www.legofoundation.com/>).

SHARE THIS STORY

