

Inside Voice: What Student Leaders Think About the Future of Education

DECEMBER 2018

About EdSurge

EdSurge is an independent news and research company devoted to covering the people, ideas and technologies that shape the future of learning. We deliver news, newsletters, expert commentaries and reports on the latest ideas, products and trends in education.

Founded in 2011, EdSurge started as a newsletter and swiftly grew into a news and resource hub that describes the rapidly changing world of education technology and connects the builders and users of edtech.

EdSurge does this through three core activities:

- Publishing timely news, analysis and research around education and the future of learning;
- Fostering a community of educators, innovators and entrepreneurs through in-person and virtual meetups and events;
- Providing an index of educational tools that educators or entrepreneurs alike can use to find the right technology for supporting teaching and learning.

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Acknowledgements

EdSurge Independent was created in 2016 with the purpose of amplifying student voices to share their thoughts on the future of education. The group meets regularly via video-chat to discuss trends, ideas and concerns around education technology and to hear from experts on the education industry. EdSurge Independent is entirely student-led and its digital publication is not affiliated with EdSurge news.

This report reflects the trends that have surfaced from the writing of eight cohorts and recommendations based on analysis of the fellows' opinions and findings.

The EdSurge Independent program and this report have been supported by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. EdSurge Independent retains sole editorial control and responsibility for the content in this report. All stories, opinions, beliefs and findings published in this report were generated autonomously by EdSurge Independent student fellows. This report was prepared by Rory Foulger, a student from the inaugural class at Minerva Schools at KGI, who has been a cohort member, a cohort leader for three semesters and a research assistant at EdSurge.

Thanks are due to every student who has taken part in EdSurge Independent, for their lively debate and insightful articles, as well as to the dozens of guest speakers who have given their time to share their thoughts and expertise with the fellows.

We appreciate in particular the leadership of Alejandra Cervantes, Rory Foulger, Jared Silver, Noah Adelstein, Larissa Moreira, Angele Law and Linda Zhang. These students guided their peer cohorts through their discovery process each semester.

Introduction

WHAT IS EDSURGE INDEPENDENT?

EdSurge Independent is a community for students from around the world to share and develop their ideas about the future of education. Each semester a cohort of 10-15 fellows meets regularly for online discussions about education, innovation and technology. Fellows also write their ideas and reflections in articles for the [EdSurge Independent blog](#).

The cohort members are diverse and represent countries from around the world. They have been associated with a variety of undergraduate and graduate programs, experiential education experiences, education technology startups and nonprofits. More than half of all the fellows to-date identify as non-male; 40 percent identify as people of color. Fifteen percent of fellows identify as low income students, individuals with disabilities, LGBTQ, or first-generation students. All of these individuals are united in their passion for education and their interest in improving it.

Through EdSurge Independent these students have a place to express their ideas and to amplify student voice in the field of education.

STUDENT VOICE REPORT

In this report, we explore what educational issues that student fellows from EdSurge Independent selected to analyze and write about. We will showcase the general themes and specific ideas of this group and their recommendations for educators, students and education technology companies.

Themes Across EdSurge Independent Articles

Themes



Curriculum & Teaching

Fellows want a rigorous and supportive curriculum with access to a variety of subjects across disciplines. They desire more experiential learning and are constantly looking for meaning through their studies. Fellows disagree about how much curriculum should focus on career-skills development.



Access & Equity

Fellows care deeply about equal access for students across the US and around the world. They make sensible and ambitious proposals to better integrate diversity into learning environments. They also express the importance of improving access to a variety of services from college advising to distance learning.



Outcomes, Testing & Grading

Many of the fellows question the value of grades and standardized testing. They also question the monopoly that traditional universities have on credentials, expressing the hope that new establishments can gain better traction in the market.



Creativity & Social Emotional Learning

Play, creativity, hobbies and extracurricular activities were high on students' priority lists, especially when writing about younger learners. Fellows agree on the positive value of offering personal development alongside academic disciplines.



The Technology Debate

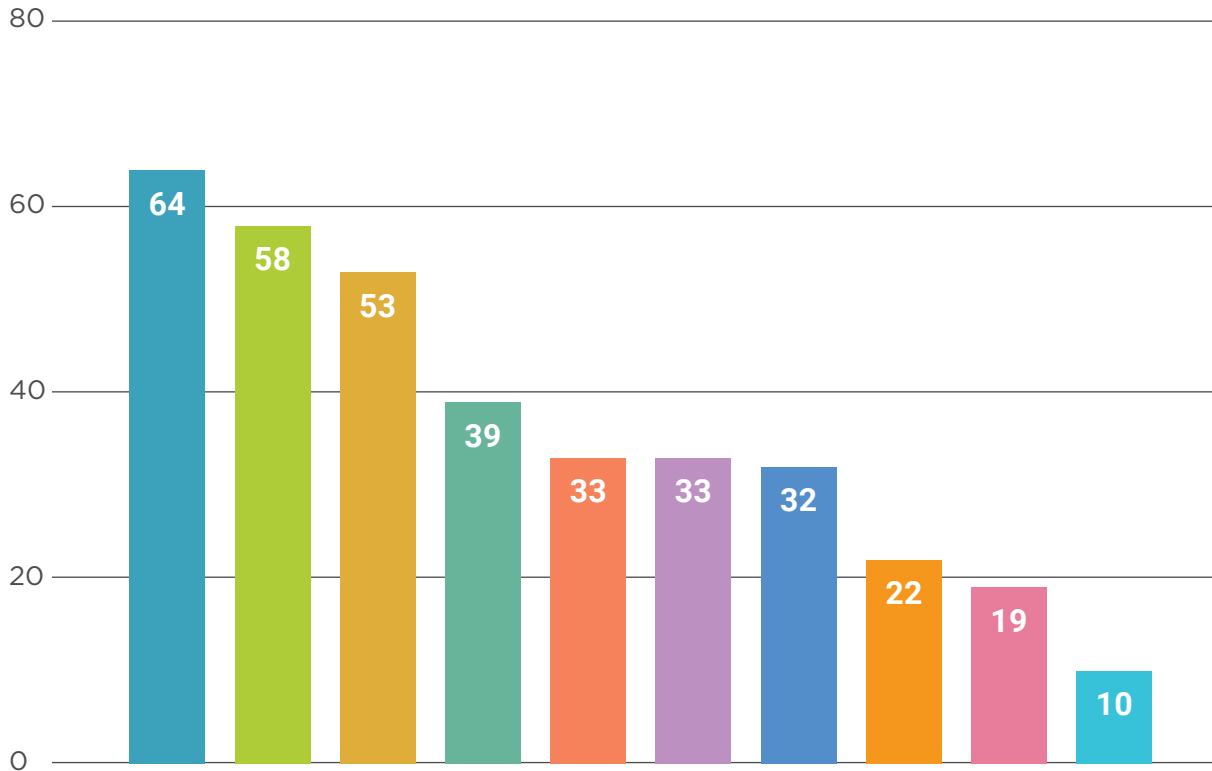
Most fellows are eager for technology to take more of a central role in transforming education. However, many expressed concern that technology is being used to solve old problems rather than support new practices.



Engaging Students: Meaning & Agency

Encouraging other students to find their voices and gain more control over aspects of their education was a common theme in the articles. Fellows would like to see students involved in designing their learning experiences and the goals of educational institutions.

Most Common Themes Across EdSurge Independent Articles



- Curriculum & Teaching
- Access & Equity
- Outcomes, Testing & Grading
- Creativity & SEL
- Engaging Students
- Technology Debate
- Value of Higher Ed
- Edtech Businesses
- Ideas for the Classroom
- Culture & Community

Curriculum & Teaching

64

ARTICLES

What do students learn in the classroom? How does that compare to what schools aim to teach? These questions were at the forefront of fellows' minds throughout their writings for EdSurge Independent. The most popular topic that cohort members addressed in their articles was curriculum; 64 of the articles focused on curriculum in some significant way. These articles can be broken down into several subtopics: course content, pedagogy and practice, extracurricular activities, finding meaning through learning, and policy ideas. In different ways, students described how they want to see curriculum designed and developed in the future.

One fellow, Jake Parrish wrote that he wished curriculum would involve more opportunities to take classes outside of his major as well as get [more real-world experiences](#).

Multiple fellows wrote that people of all ages should have opportunities to study a variety of subjects across the STEM and humanities disciplines. They felt students shouldn't be limited to a subsection of academics, but rather have continual and deep access to the whole curriculum. Alongside access to academic breadth, fellows expressed the importance of supporting personal development for students as well as teaching skills for problem solving and critical thinking. Fellows were eager to see more collaboration across disciplines, both in K-12 and in higher education.

Fellows frequently brought up the problem that the classroom feels segregated from everyday life. The importance of play, experiential learning and of bringing personal history into the classroom were stressed in many articles, as was the importance of bringing students to learning experiences outside the school. Articles presented ideas such as inviting community members to campus to



Often, educators see social and emotional development as targeted intervention for students with behavior issues or special needs. Instead of viewing students as the problem, we should change our mindset and think about how we can build a learning environment that supports social, emotional and academic development for everyone.

Jake Parrish
'Discovery in Education:
Finding your Path'
Aug. 5, 2017

teach skills, offering more field trips, spending more time outdoors, hosting hackathons and working with students to design and lead their own class sessions. Fellows drew on research in co-curricular learning and several stressed that they believe teaching practices should be based on the science of learning.

Students also shared their pain points and frustrations with curriculum offerings. Fellows often wrote that they find it difficult to see the point of school and crave more guidance to help identify their interests and career goals. Students want to feel passionate about their learning and to consider the “why” questions behind their curriculum, not only the “what” and “how” questions.

Point of Tension

Approximately half of the articles about curriculum expressed that too much focus is placed on career preparation, missing opportunities for learning and personal development. The remaining half of articles that touched on this topic suggested that universities should strengthen their focus on career readiness.

While fellows overwhelmingly agreed on many of the issues summarized above, there was significant contention and differing opinions around how much colleges and universities should focus on career skills. Around half of the articles focusing on curriculum reported too much concentration on careers and not enough on learning how to learn and personal development. The other half said that schools aren’t doing enough to close the skills gap, leaving students unprepared for future careers.

Access & Equity

58
ARTICLES

What types of educational experiences do different learners have access to? How can we increase access to excellent educational experiences, both inside and outside the classroom? EdSurge Independent fellows collectively wrote 58 articles focused on problems surrounding access and equity. Some articles highlighted specific groups who need more support and some focused on the kinds of support which could be given. Still others focused on high college tuition and low return on investment. The remaining writers pondered ways technology can support teachers and better distribute resources.

For Amanda Wahlstedt, accessing high-quality education had always been a challenge. As a [high achieving, low-income rural student](#), she struggled to find mentors, college advisors and teachers who could help her progress in her education. When a private college advisor offered Wahlstedt her services free of charge, she was accepted to Wellesley College with a QuestBridge Scholarship. Now into her college years, Wahlstedt believes she has a harder time adjusting than her middle-class peers who have received more parental support and preparation for college both academically and personally.

Fellows were especially interested in improving access to high-quality educational resources for groups such as low-income students, people of color, individuals with disabilities and mental health issues, refugees, first-generation college students and women and non-binary students.

Fellows were adamant that access to education should not depend on geographical location. They felt that disadvantaged schools should receive more support, such as highly trained staff and teachers. Some asserted that education

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When you attend a rural public high school like I did, no one explains to you that you are creating a resume that you will use when you apply to colleges... Poor rural students cannot be expected to know what opportunities are available for us when we are often busy trying to survive.

Amanda Wahlstedt, 'Poor Rural Students Need More From Colleges'
Feb. 24, 2017

budgets should include more resources and specific support mechanisms for lower-income and minority students and that colleges should do more to help students understand the admissions process.

Many EdSurge Independent writers lamented the high cost of college education, especially the high cost of valuable “extras,” such as taking non-required classes. Students were concerned about accumulating student loans and coming away with debt from university.

Fellows like Hannah Zwick presented technical solutions for some of the problems surrounding access. Zwick suggested that **creating opportunities for online learning at the higher-ed level** would help students who work, who can’t relocate, and who otherwise can’t afford to attend a college in person. Her online graduate program at the University of Denver gave her the opportunity to study alongside a diverse group of individuals, many of whom would not have been able to take the course on location.

Through discussion boards and recorded lectures, another fellow, Ugne’ Mikalaju-naite’, was able to continue and **enhance her studies despite experiencing some mental health issues and a learning disability** that made it difficult for her to regularly attend class in person. Her tutorial discussion classes were significantly enhanced by having the opportunity to be graded on a discussion board. The class got to hear from quieter students and she felt everyone had to put more thought into their written answers than they would have in an oral discussion.

Consensus

Fellows viewed access as a top priority. They expressed that the quality of an education should not depend on a learner’s race, family income, zip code, gender, citizenship or health. Fellows advocated for teachers, mentors, college counselors and resources to be distributed equally.

Outcomes, Testing and Grading



ARTICLES

Does standardized testing demonstrate learning? Do high SAT or ACT scores correlate with college success? EdSurge Independent fellows attributed test preparation, family income and cultural factors into success on such tests. Many suggested that standardized testing should not be a factor in college admissions. The feeling that tests produce pressure to perform, at the expense of learning, exploration, and health, was pervasive in the fellows' articles.

Julia Thompson wrote about how stereotype threat, the anxiety of fulfilling a negative perception, [can present a barrier to students taking the SAT and ACT](#). Students start the test by being asked to identify their gender and race, potentially triggering the idea that their gender and/or race could cause them to do worse on this test, and that this mindset often leads to lower scores, Thompson wrote.

Fellows also expressed concern that traditional grading schemes can degrade the quality of learning. If students are always aiming for an A, stretching for a 4.0, then does success become more about the numbers that try to represent learning outcomes than about the learning itself? Some fellows shared that learning feels less meaningful when it is distilled into numbers to be exchanged for college admission.



Universities are under pressure to get as many students through the graduation funnel as possible, so all that matters whilst you are at university is academic achievement. Usually, students are only incentivized to get good grades in order for them to graduate as soon as possible. They aren't incentivized to spend time next to their studies doing relevant jobs, doing extra-curricular activities, learning new languages or to look for alternative ways to learn and gain new skills outside of the classroom. This is a shame because when you ask employers, those are the things that really matter.

Daniel Breitwieser, 'Changing a system where the incentive-structure is all wrong', March 13 2018.

Fellows also expressed concern that skills like bilingualism, critical thinking, problem-solving, leadership and grit are overlooked in assessment, despite believing these skills are more important for their post-graduate lives than earning a specific GPA.

EdSurge Independent fellow Matt Baughman wrote that he worried universities have a monopoly on credentialing and that it's leading to a gap between academics and the skills that employers want. Students, Baughman wrote, feel uninspired to take **nontraditional routes** because many of the highest-paying jobs require a degree from an accredited college or university. Still, many employers say that **graduates do not have the job skills they need**, wrote Daniel Breitwieser. He also argued that universities focus more on research than teaching, leading to poor-quality instruction and high levels of student boredom.

Taking it Further

**What should grades demonstrate about learning?
What about test scores?**

Does the current system reflect the qualities, skills and knowledge students are gaining?

Fellows often wrote about the need to discover new ways of assessing students.

Creativity & Social Emotional Learning

39

ARTICLES

Where does education take place? Does most learning happen in a classroom? What is taught in schools and why? These were the foundational questions addressed by the 39 articles around creativity and social-emotional learning (SEL). Fellows demonstrated an ongoing belief that schooling does not stop at the classroom door. They wrote about concerns that learning outside of the classroom is not viewed as important as their academic pursuits.

Erika Bullock worked on a program teaching a seventh-grade summer program to prepare students for high school. In the program, she encountered a disruptive student. When Bullock took the time to speak to him about his behavior, she found that other teachers had dismissed him as a troublemaker, or worse, as stupid. However, when she made space for him to discover his potential, **he started to thrive**.

Fellows described the importance of educators viewing students at all levels of education as human beings with unique lives and needs. Many fellows pointed to mental health in particular as an issue that deserves more attention in higher education, and several EdSurge Independents plan to work on helping children develop coping strategies early on in their studies.

When Angele Law first heard about social-emotional learning, she was skeptical. She wondered how focusing on a child's personal development could **actually improve academic learning outcomes**. After spending time at some schools in the US, Brazil and China that focus on social-emotional learning, Law found a new passion for educating students in a way that considers their needs in and out of the classroom.

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Often, educators see social and emotional development as targeted intervention for students with behavior issues or special needs. Instead of viewing students as the problem, we should change our mindset and think about how we can build a learning environment that supports social, emotional and academic development for everyone.

Angele Law, 'Social & Emotional Learning (SEL)? Not Just a Buzzword', May 23 2018.

Consensus

Fellows expressed a desire for schools and universities to embrace learning beyond academics. They recommended opportunities for learners to explore hobbies and interests as well as the space to develop a range of skills.

Some fellows suggested getting rid of traditional grading and assessment could better support students. These fellows took issue with what they consider to be a constrained curriculum, particularly in K-12 schools, citing a lack of computer science, a narrow definition of literacy, and outdated methods of teaching problem-solving.

Seth Gordon advocated for children to **learn skills through hobbies and extracurriculars.**

As a classical pianist, he learned skills such as self-regulation and self-discipline and had the chance to develop his creativity and responsibility. Gordon argued that all children should have the opportunity to find hobbies that give them the chance to express themselves in creative ways while also gaining critical personal and teamwork skills.

The Technology Debate

33
ARTICLES

Approximately 25 percent of articles written for EdSurge Independent presented an argument about a specific educational technology (or, in some cases, the general use of technology in education). Fellows agreed about the importance for learners to gain computer literacy skills, but few thought the role of technology in the classroom ended there. Some writers pushed back against the idea that learning to code is essential, but most fellows agreed that technology skills at a basic level should be taught.

Priya Mathur, an elementary school teacher, was learning how to code while she was an EdSurge Independent fellow. She believes that teaching students the building blocks of computational thinking—which she described as breaking problems down into tractable elements and then building solutions—is an increasingly important skill. But Mathur isn't satisfied with simply teaching students popular coding languages like Scratch or Python. Rather, she is more concerned about [preparing students to learn coding languages in the future](#).

Amanda Wahlstedt agreed that computational thinking is important but cautioned that not all students start school with the same background or skills around technology. Many need to be led through basics of computer literacy that Wahlstedt views as a component of media literacy. Learning how to search for information, how to discern what's real from what's fake, and understand how tools and apps are designed to capture users' attention, she said, should also be [part of the conversation around technology in schools](#).

Fellows suggested many ways in which technology could be integrated into teaching practices and curriculum, such as by utilizing MOOCs and adaptive learning platforms.

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When I was in elementary school, being computer literate meant that you could type 200 words per minute on a Word Document and create a PowerPoint presentation. Now, in elementary schools there is a push for children to learn how to code and create. This shift from understanding programs to creating programs seems to be the natural evolution of computer literacy.

Priya Mathur,
'From Hello Kids to Hello World',
July 13, 2017.



We now have the technological power to individualize the curriculum to each student, allowing some to push themselves faster, and some to take a slower pace, without separating them physically.

Rory Foulger,
'Why Adaptive Learning?'
July 4, 2016.

Rory Foulger argued that when students have the opportunity to follow a curriculum at their own pace **they learn faster and better**. Children struggling with a math concept can spend more time on it without disrupting the class, Foulger wrote; and children with higher reading levels can work on more complex texts without having to wait for their peers.

Yasmin Almeida Lobato Morais advocated for bringing MOOCs more intentionally into the fold, especially to **support people who have been displaced and refugees**. Online classes, she argued, give people the power to continue their education even when their circumstances change.

Across cohorts, many fellows wrote about concerns they have about student privacy and data protection. Several wrote about how integrating technology that captures student data could lead to more challenges on campus rather than providing solutions to existing issues.

Shelby Ostergaard wrote that when colleges turn to predictive analytics to identify students who show early signs of struggle, they are **missing the bigger picture behind patterns** around why students fail or drop out. Daniel Sinclair, however, sees opportunity for this kind of technology, and wrote about the potential of **nudging students to help them complete classes**, submit financial aid applications on time, and avoid summer melt.

One of the most common concerns that fellows shared was the perceived lack of consensus around the purpose of integrating technology into learning. For example, technology that grades math worksheets or creates flashcards for rote memorization might be a time-saver, but doesn't always improve education. Educators need to work towards a more common purpose, and this, fellows said, would ideally happen without the wide adoption of any specific technology.

Taking it Further

What is the purpose of education in the 21st century? Fellows encouraged educators and tool developers to design and implement technologies in ways that don't exacerbate existing barriers to education for students.

Engaging Students: Meaning, Agency and Activism

33
ARTICLES

EdSurge Independent fellows were often intrigued by a particular buzzword in education: engagement. How do students become more engaged in their institutions, communities and studies? At least 33 articles focused on the concept of engagement and three subtopics surfaced: meaning, agency and activism.

Fellows argued that students of all ages are searching for meaning in their studies. However, fellows each had a different definition of meaning and what they looked for in their own education. Some found meaning by searching for a broader impact on the world and others looked for meaning around their career goals, particular majors or institutions. Many of the fellows described gap years, studying abroad and internships as particularly meaningful from both a global-impact and practical skill-building perspective. Fellows who learned outside the institutional environment believed they had found more interesting challenges to solve using their studies.

Several fellows also shared that they crave some agency in their own learning and want students to be more involved in the development of their education.

Yuxi Liu works on projects that **put children in the center of the design process** for creating educational tools. Liu develops apps and games, and she believes many of the same principles she uses for programming can be applied to the classroom. By involving children in the design of their physical learning space, activities and curriculum, Liu said, educators can give students a sense of ownership and agency over the learning process.

Sarah Toutant wrote about how encouraging **student voice and political activity** can also lead to stronger engagement in learning. In a related article, Megan Simmons

Consensus

EdSurge Independent fellows want more student agency when it comes to designing the educational experience. Fellows also saw merit in taking time off to pursue alternative pathways such as gap years, attending non-traditional education or training programs, and getting involved in student politics and campus activism.

investigated why college students protest less now than in the past. As an academic exercise, she said, the process of protest and working for change can serve as [a lesson in civil participation](#).



2018 can easily be called the year of the student. From student-led walkouts to the fight for school safety to initiatives to getting young people registered to vote and involved in the midterm elections, there have never been more opportunities to for students to use their voices and see the change that their actions and words can make. I'm optimistic and excited to see students have the same experience I had where they see first hand the impact they can make, and look forward to the not-so-distant future where students naturally see the capacity for change that they possess

Megan Simmons, 'The Power of Student Voice', May 14, 2018.

These fellows believe universities should actively encourage student activism and work with students to find ideas to bring institutional change to the learning process and broader student experience.

Conclusion

Student voice is an integral part of shaping the future of higher education. This report shows the diversity of experience and ideas that students can bring, and is a collaborative effort to inform college and university leaders what students today are thinking about education for tomorrow. As EdSurge Independent fellow and cohort leader, Angele Law, puts it, “The best way to improve education is to involve students in the co-creation and decision-making processes at all stages.”

Digging into the op-eds and articles written by EdSurge Independent fellows shows these students want to see more collaboration with faculty, administrators and partners outside of education institutions, such as local employers. Many EdSurge Independent fellows feel there is a gap between the skills they are gaining in school and the ones sought by their future employers. The fellows recommended that, along with gathering more student input to better meet their needs in and out of the classroom, institutions should explore working with employers to prepare students for opportunities after graduation. .

The collection of articles from the EdSurge Independent demonstrate how today’s students come from a wide range of backgrounds and interests. And while many in this group express excitement about the potential for technology on campus, students are also skeptical and concerned about ways technology is implemented in the classroom, in particular if tools could worsen issues around access or overlook students’ right to privacy. These fellows want to see, and help build, the technology that can bring real change to the field—to revolutionize delivery, content and the way educators and students approach learning. The fellows support technological and pedagogical changes that will integrate their real life experience into the classroom and subsequently into their lives.

Methodology

COHORT DIVERSITY

EdSurge Independent fellows self report demographic information. Demographic data was anonymized and aggregated for this report.

STORY ANALYSIS

To extract key concerns and themes across all EdSurge Independent articles to-date, each article was tagged with multiple themes. For example, the piece titled [Burned out at age six! Are we destroying the love of learning?](#), by Jake Parrish, was tagged with themes such as: K12 Education, Teacher Creativity, Learning Through Play, Student Engagement, International Education, and Virtual Reality.

The data associated with these tags was then assessed for themes and subthemes. For example, the Curriculum theme had six subthemes: Subjects, Pedagogies and Methods, Extracurriculars, Problems, Meaning/Purpose, and Policies. This allowed cross-reference and assessment of tags that appeared under different themes and subthemes.

This report analyzed EdSurge Independent articles that were published before August 2018.

www.edsurge.com/independent