

To cite:

Shamburg, C. (2021). Kickstarting educational innovation. Instructional Technology Council, 2021 Annual Meeting, Virtual.

Kickstarting Educational Innovation

By Christopher Shamburg

New Jersey City University

Educational Technology Department

www.njcu.edu/cshamburg

Abstract

This paper reviews highlights from my research on educationally related Kickstarter campaigns, including case studies of two successful campaign founders, insights from a qualitative content analysis of 245 successful educationally-related campaigns, and a detailed description of successfully funded campaigns related to adult education.

Keywords: crowdfunding, innovation, adult education, Kickstarter, educational innovation.

Introduction

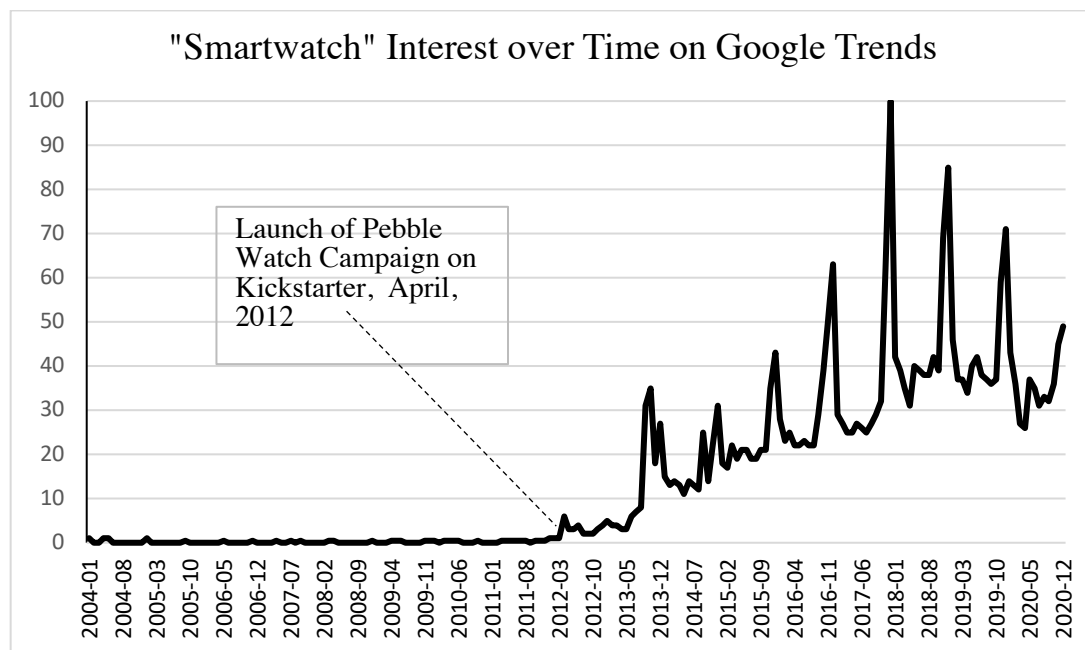
Kickstarter is a platform where new ideas, entrepreneurship, and the power of people voting with their pocketbooks all meet. Kickstarter is one of the leading crowdfunding sites in the world. Crowdfunding is, basically, the financing of a project through small contributions, usually over the Internet. This phenomenon has larger implications---implications that stretch back to the inception of the World Wide Web. The phenomenon of Kickstarter tests some of the fundamental aspirations of technology optimists—the potential of the Internet to increase access, spread ideas, and open up opportunities for those who were previously excluded—excluded from markets, education, ideas, social connections, and communication platforms. This is not the finance of large investors or banks, but regular folks who share the same vision of the inventor—it is the power to spread an idea to millions and then get hundreds to invest—nonprofessional entrepreneur to nonprofessional investor, person to person, peer to peer. This research begins to map the terrain of one very specific and very important area of this world—the world of innovations in adult education.

Besides this democratic ideal that is popularly ascribed to the Internet, there is another phenomenon that informs this research: the nature of innovation--specifically, the concept of the adjacent possible. The adjacent possible is a theory of evolution developed by Stuart Kauffman (1996, 2000) in biology that was popularized by Steven Johnson (2011). The adjacent possible describes evolution and innovation as a system creatively remixing with nearby materials—from the building blocks of life on earth to the car-parts incubator, a medical device implemented in developing countries using car parts to facilitate maintenance and repair (Johnson). As Johnson describes it, the adjacent possible are shadows of our future—our current world casting potential

directions from the material at hand. Kickstarter is a fertile platform for the adjacent possible; a place where these successful Kickstarter campaigns give us a glimpse of our possible futures.

Here are two popular examples where a product or organization funded through Kickstarter can correlate to larger trends in US culture and society. The Pebble Watch was launched on Kickstarter in 2012 and raised over 10 million dollars, three years before the Apple Watch, and was at the beginning of the current wave of interest in smartwatches (Thompson, 2018). Similarly, the podcasting network Radiotopia set the record in the publishing, radio, and podcasting category in Kickstarter in November 2014 (Ramachandran, 2014), coinciding with the beginning of the podcasting renaissance (Roose, 2014). It is one of the

Figure 1. Pebble Watch and Interest in Smartwatches



Crowdfunding

The verb ‘crowdfund’ means to “fund (a project or venture) by raising money from a large number of people, each of whom contributes a relatively small amount, typically via the internet” (Oxford English Dictionary, n.d.). The first use of the word in print was in 2008 in *The Guardian* to describe the funding strategy of the docudrama film *The Age of Stupid* (Oxford English Dictionary). *The Age of Stupid* was written and directed by activist filmmaker Franny Armstrong (who made the documentary *McLibel*), and has used a method called "crowdfunding" - a mixture of social events, mass email pleas and website donations” (Goodey, 2008, para. 1).

This funding model was pioneered in independent films a few years before by Jim Gilliam and Robert Greenwald for their film *Iraq for Sale*, which raised over \$250,000 from 3000 backers online in 10 days (Booth, 2006). In a Washington Post article in 2006 that described the funding, the term “people-powered” was used, and no mention of ‘crowdfund’. Jim Gilliam would go on to develop the software and company for NationBuilder (www.nationbuilder.com) – software that helps political campaigns and advocacy groups organize grassroots campaigns.

However, the story of online crowdfunding goes back a little further. In 1997 the British rock band Marillion raised \$60,000 online to fund its North American Tour (Hobbs et al., 2016; Masters, 2013). In 2003 musicians had a platform for online crowdfunding with Artistshare, a website for musicians to solicit donations for projects (Freedman & Nutting, 2015). Artistshare pioneered a system of giving contributors tiered rewards based on their level of contribution (Freedman & Nutting). Contributors could get tiered rewards like music downloads, an artist’s comments on the songs, audio tracks from rehearsals, or exclusive interviews (Artistshare, 2004). Interest in crowdfunding surged after the financial crisis of 2007-2008 when tighter lending

restrictions dried up startup capital (Antonenko et al., 2014). Kickstarter was launched in April 2009.

Informal learning among adults is a diverse, broad, and important area of study. Rogoff et al. (2016) noted that the common definition of informal learning is simply learning done outside of formal educational systems, though their work explores informal learning beyond this commonly accepted definition. Adult learning—when people are beyond the age of traditional formal schooling—is often informal. Cyril Houle (1996) a major scholar of adult learning, described adult education as:

The process by which men and women (alone, in groups, or in institutional settings) seek to improve themselves or their society by increasing their skill, knowledge, or sensitiveness; or it is any process by which individuals, groups, or institutions try to help men and women improve in these ways. (p. 41)

This definition encompasses the products and services in the Kickstarter campaigns categorized as adult learning in this research.

A Kickstarter campaign can begin with just an idea and grow from there. A founder gives a title, a description, a funding goal, and a time limit. Videos are optional but have become de facto requirements for successful campaigns over the last five years—every campaign in the data set had a video. Part of the allure are tiered rewards for funding—the more you give, the bigger the reward. You can get multiple or deluxe versions of a product, VIP access to an event, or, for lower amounts of funding, some related merchandise or public acknowledgement as a funder. The campaign solicits backers through the Kickstarter page and other social media platforms—usually that of the founder and it starts with his existing social media community. If the campaign reaches its funding goal, the backer keeps the money, minus a 5% commission to

Kickstarter and between 3-5% financial processing fee. If the campaign does not reach the goal, the founder gets nothing, and the money is returned to the erstwhile backers. After a successful campaign is funded, there is no guarantee of the venture's success—each campaign lists potential risks to the completion of the venture.

Cases

Below are two cases of educationally related campaigns. We will look at the work of educational founders and then go deeper into the class of adult education.

In London in 2015 Jeremy Bond successfully funded Muro on Kickstarter, a high-end, customizable wooden busy board for young children. Jeremy got the idea for Muro when he was working with his brother on a toy for his nephew in his brother's garage. He had no background in design, the education of young children, or entrepreneurship. When he developed the idea for Muro and the Kickstarter Campaign, he was working in sales for medical devices in the United Kingdom. After he launched his successful campaign, he began the Muro business full time, and has been doing it for 5 years as the company's CEO. Developing, selling, and distributing the Muro directly to consumers is his full-time job.

Tiffany Aliche is a successful financial educator; she is professional known as The Budgetnista and has had her work featured on *Good Morning America*, *The Today Show*, *Black Enterprise*, and other major media outlets. In 2018 she successfully funded her Kickstarter campaign *Happy Birthday Mali More*, a children's book that teaches financial literacy. She could have funded it herself, but Kickstarter offered the advantage of an early marketing platform. Though the book is for all children, it features a female African American protagonist. Tiffany saw the important of financial literacy for young African American children and their families when she was a teacher in Newark 15 years ago. She was so moved by this need, she became a

fulltime financial educator. She has developed online courses, workshops, and public speaking engagements dedicated to the importance of financial literacy. The Kickstarter campaign for the book is one relatively minor product in a suite of business ventures and advocacy efforts.

Tiffany and Jeremy differ in products, motives, locations, gender, race, and trajectories that their campaigns have taken their careers. Nevertheless, they share a pivotal similarity, one shared by all 245 campaigns in this data set: they both had ideas about education that were interesting enough to attract a critical mass of investors to make their projects successful. They are 2 of the 245 campaigns that made up the sample of this research.

Method

For this research I looked at 245 campaigns—every successful campaign started and completed between January 1, 2015 and December 31, 2020 that has the word “education” or “educational” in its description and that set a goal of between \$10,000 and \$100,000. I used a web scraper developed at Apify, I first imported the data into an Excel sheet. I did initial data analysis there then I reformatted and then I imported into Atlas.ti. The 245 campaigns spanned 77 Kickstarter categories (see Table 1) and came from 16 different countries (see Table 2).

Table 1. Kickstarter Categories of Campaigns in Sample

Documentary	18	Farms	3	Photography	2	Narrative Film	1
Product Design	17	Fashion	3	Puzzles	2	Nature	1
Art	15	Food	3	Webcomics	2	Nonfiction	1
Children's Books	15	Gadgets	3	3D Printing	1	Painting	1
Tabletop Games	11	Mixed Media	3	Academic	1	Periodicals	1
Robots	10	Mobile Games	3	Accessories	1	Playing Cards	1
Publishing	8	Software	3	Animation	1	Print	1
Apps	6	Sound	3	Audio	1	Rock	1

Technology	6	Web	3	Childrenswear	1	Shorts	1
Art Books	5	Webseries	3	Comics	1	Small Batch	1
Crafts	5	Comic Books	2	Dance	1	Social Practice	1
Film & Video	5	Country & Folk	2	Design	1	Space Exploration	1
Music	5	DIY Electronics	2	DIY	1	Theater	1
Spaces	5	Family	2	Drama	1	Vegan	1
Video Games	5	Food Trucks	2	Gaming Hardware	1	Wearables	1
Apparel	4	Footwear	2	Hip-Hop	1	Workshops	1
Architecture	4	Games	2	Horror	1	Young Adult	1
Makerspaces	4	Graphic Novels	2	Illustration	1		
Restaurants	4	Hardware	2	Journalism	1		
Classical Music	3	Kids	2	Knitting	1		

Table 2

Countries of Origin of Successful Education-Related Campaigns

Country	# of Campaigns	Country	# of Campaigns
the United States	192	France	2
the United Kingdom	22	Ireland	2
Australia	6	Denmark	1
New Zealand	4	Doha, Qatar	1
Canada	3	Hong Kong	1
Italy	3	Japan	1
the Netherlands	3	Mexico	1
Austria	2	Switzerland	1

What each one represents is one of the main findings of my research—that educational Kickstarter come in five distinct categories. All of the 245 campaigns—that span 77 Kickstarter categories—are either an organizational initiative, digital product, legacy media (print books, board game, a medium popular before 1990), tangible product, or documentary film. These are like containers that hold the content or ‘subject’ of the campaign. I think this was a fundamental finding of my research because it gives a vocabulary to use and share. It can be a helpful starting point to other researchers as well as current and future Kickstarter founders to conceptualize campaigns. The 10 leading subjects that filled these containers were: well-being, STEM, environment, adult education, developing nation, young children, art, music, race, and girls’ education.

The examples below from each of the categories can help delineate the boundaries of the terrain.

- Organizational--ENVELOP--a space for performance and education focused on immersive audio (Willits, 2015).
- Digital Product--Queer Kid Stuff—a Webseries that explains LGBTQ+ issues to young children (Amer, 2018).
- Legacy Media--My First Startup-- a comic book to teach kids about entrepreneurship (Kieve, 2015)
- Tangible Product--Soundbops--blocks that play musical notes and chords from different instruments as they are pressed and stacked (Tougher, 2018).
- Documentary Film--Somaliland: The Abaarso Story--a documentary about five Somali students pursuing their education in the United States (Lee, 2017).

The Landscape of Adult Education

What would be useful in this presentation—considering the focus of the conference—would be to go over adult education. There were 25 successful campaigns in this category, spanning all five categories (see Table 3).

Table 3. Adult Education Campaigns by Category

Type of Campaign	Number
Organizational	9
Documentary Film	6
Legacy Media	5
Digital Products	4
Tangible Products	1

Table 4. Successful Kickstarter Campaigns in Adult Education from Sample

Category	Name	Year Funded	Backers	Total Funded	Goal
Organizational	Circadium	2016	308	\$50,803	\$50,000
Organizational	Saving the Nome Schoolhouse	2019	214	\$44,103	\$40,000
Organizational	The Artist Odyssey	2015	265	\$25,150	\$25,000
Organizational	Keep Booklyn in Brooklyn	2017	241	\$19,045	\$15,000
Organizational	Pittsburgh Edge	2016	46	25,632	\$25,000
Organizational	Know Your City Summer Projects	2017	202	\$10,650	\$10,000
Organizational	Live to Race	2015	70	\$50,380	\$50,000
Organizational	Help Greg Fox open a recording studio in Brooklyn	2020	256	\$19,604	\$15,000
Organizational	A Just Brew: Drink Coffee, End Slavery	2019	106	\$25,000	\$25,000
Documentary Film	When We Fight: L.A. teachers' strike documentary	2020	163	\$12,018	\$5,000

Documentary Film	Adelante Maestros	2018	103	\$18,160	\$17,846
Documentary Film	Caregiver: A Love Story	2020	262	\$31,291	\$24,500
Documentary Film	Ordinary Heroes	2019	99	\$29,915	\$29,750
Documentary Film	DARK AGE: The Big Money Attack on Public Education	2017	130	\$15,721	\$1,500
Documentary Film	Marta	2019	38	\$9,758	\$9,720
Legacy Media	My American Education: Students Talk About Public School	2016	131	\$36,320	\$36,000
Legacy Media	Oh Joy Sex Toy: Volume 2	2015	1,434	\$65,709	\$18,000
Legacy Media	Surviving the World: A Photocomic Education: "Best Of" Book	2018	897	\$42,819	\$13,000
Legacy Media	Babies Build Toddlers	2020	140	\$50,255	\$50,000
Legacy Media	Pirate Crew Paper Dolls - Breast Cancer Education Collection	2019	95	\$10,601	\$10,000
Legacy Media	Undeclared: Higher Education- A College Visual Novel	2017	328	\$15,267	\$15,000
Digital Product	Helping Therapists Help Survivors of Psychopathy	2020	35	11,602	\$10,000
Digital Product	Puppets teach small businesses how to be successful!	2017	111	\$15,225	\$15,000
Digital Product	VestU.com - Clear, unbiased investment education	2015	100	\$11,875	\$10,000
Tangible Product (co-coded as "Marginally Educational")	Utamu - Ethically-made jackets that empower communities	2019	94	\$12,767	\$10,000

Summary

In conclusion, there are several trends in campaigns for education and adult education in ecosystem of Kickstarter. Kickstarter is a crowdfunding platform that can provide capital and marketing for a variety of projects from a variety of entrepreneurs. There were 255 educational campaigns that fell into five distinct categories from the 77 self-identified categories in

Kickstarter—Organizational, Documentary Film, Legacy Media, Digital Product and Tangible Product. Successful campaigns for adult education are heavily promoting organizations and are infrequently promoting tangible products. Looking at these successful campaigns can offer us offer glimpses into future trends and issues in education.

References

- Amer, L. (2018). Queer kid stuff: Teaching preschoolers their LGBTZ's. [Kickstarter Campaign]. <https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/1635581982/queer-kid-stuff-teaching-preschoolers-their-lgbtqs>
- Artistshare (2004, August 12), *Maria Schneider*. From the Internet Archive December 31, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20040812201132/http://www.artistshare.com/artist_project_join_details.aspx?artistID=1&projectID=2&productID=316&selection=1&salesTypeID=6&headerTx=participant+offers
- Booth, W. (2006, August 20). His fans greenlight the project. *Washington Post*. <https://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/08/18/AR2006081800210.html>
- Freedman, D., & Nutting, M. R. (2015). A brief history of crowdfunding. *Including Rewards, Donation, Debt, and Equity Platforms in the USA*. <https://pdf4pro.com/view/a-brief-history-of-crowdfunding-david-m-freedman-219ec7.html>
- Goodey, J. (2008, June 26). For sale: A Warm Fuzzy feeling. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2008/jun/27/filmandmusic1.filmandmusic>
- Hobbs, J., Grigore, G., & Molesworth, M. (2016). Success in the management of crowdfunding projects in the creative industries. *Internet Research*, 26 (1),146-166.

Houle, C.O., (1996) *The design of education. 2nd ed.* Jossey Bass.

Johnson, S. (2011). *Where good ideas come from: The natural history of innovation.* Penguin.

Kauffman, S. (1996). *At home in the universe: The search for the laws of self-organization and complexity.* Oxford university press.

Kauffman, S. A. (2000). *Investigations.* Oxford University Press.

Kieve, D. (2015). My first startup: Educational comic book for kids. [Kickstarter Campaign]
<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/537757659/my-first-startup-educational-comic-book-for-kids>

Lee, H. (2017) Somaliland: The Abaarso story. [Kickstarter Campaign]
<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/71323644/somaliland-the-abaarso-story>

Masters, T (2013, September 1). Marillion 'understood where the internet was going early on'.
The Guardian. <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-23881382>

Oxford English Dictionary. (n.d.) Crowdfund. www.oed.com

Ramachandran, V, (2014, November 14). Radiotopia sets record for publishing and radio funding on Kickstarter. Knight Foundation.
<https://knightfoundation.org/articles/radiotopia-sets-record-for-publishing-and-radio-funding-on-kickstarter/>

Rogoff, B., Callanan, M., Gutiérrez, K. D., & Erickson, F. (2016). The Organization of Informal Learning. *Review of Research in Education*, 40(1), 356–401.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0091732X16680994>

Roose, K. (2014). What's behind the great podcast renaissance? *New York Magazine.*
<http://nymag.com/intelligencer/2014/10/whats-behind-the-great-podcast-renaissance.html>

Thompson, J. (2018, January 8). A concise history of the smartwatch. *Bloomberg*.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2018-01-08/a-concise-history-of-the-smartwatch>

Tougher, M. (2018). Soundbops: Music building blocks.

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/2009796190/soundbops-music-building-blocks>

Willits, C. (2015). Envelop. [Kickstarter Campaign].

<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/envelop/envelop-3d-sound>