



About the Emergent Series

This episode is part of the Learning Uncut Emergent series where we talk about rapidly changing business models, and how Learning and Development can support organisations to adapt. Exploring how learning professionals can emerge from disruption as relevant and effective. The series is co-hosted by Michelle Ockers, Laura Overton and Shannon Tipton.

Shannon Tipton:

Hello, this is Shannon. You know it's been wonderful to collaborate with Laura and Michelle on creating the Emergent Series. We see the discussions we are having with guests as being part of a collective sense making process to figure out how we can anchor ourselves in the current business reality and help other learning professionals identify practical actions that they can take to be more effective and to adapt to the changes created by the pandemic response. Learning Uncut has always been about keeping it real and having real conversations and this Emergent Series is no different. what we want to do is reflect on all that has been discussed and figure out the answer to the "now what?" question. What actions can learning professionals and learning teams take from these conversations to emerge from this disruption as being more relevant and effective than ever before?

Now it's your turn. And we're going to invite you to take part in figuring all of this out. We're planning a highly interactive community event. It's not a conference and you won't spoken at. It will be more like connecting issues to people and generating solutions through conversations. The goal is for L&D professionals to come together and focus on a series of business challenges to generate practical ideas and actions that can be taken away and applied in your organisations. As the event takes shape, we will share more information on the Emergent episodes and also in our social media channels to let you know how you can join in. We look forward to hearing from you.

Shannon Tipton:

Hello and welcome to the Learning Uncut Podcast, the emergent series. I am Shannon Tipton, guest host and owner/founder of Learning Rebels where we encourage organizations to think differently about training. And as a person who is eternally curious about all manner of technology and its applications for people who know me, our organization is about helping people be better, smarter, faster. And I am so excited to have two women on the podcast today who are imminently qualified to discuss technology and the biases towards and against how we use it today and where it fits within the L&D industry, especially now during this time of immense disruption.

Shannon Tipton:

I have with me, Stella Collins and Stella is the CLO of Stellar Labs, future learning of today and the author of Neuroscience for Learning and Development and the webinars pocketbook. She is also one of the brain ladies and I had the pleasure of meeting her in Berlin last year and just fabulous and she is eternally curious as evidenced by this line in her LinkedIn profile, which states, "Curiosity is about how people think, work and learn and has led me to investigate how psychology and neuroscience apply to training drives personal and organizational change."

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Shannon Tipton:

And that statement leads me to our next guest who is Dani Johnson and Dani is the co-founder and principal analyst of RedThread Research and the goal of RedThread Research is to provide the most relevant unbiased research and insights on people practices by using new research methods and engaging a broader community. But I particularly love this line that's in her LinkedIn profile. And it states, "We started this firm we're data geeks, we're people geeks and we honestly can't imagine doing anything else professionally." And I love that because I think that that's a thread that connects the three of us. Just being so excited about what we do professionally and how it helps the greater good of the industry. So welcome ladies, thank you for being with me today.

Dani Johnson:

Thank you. Happy to be here.

Stella Collins:

Thank you. Yup.

Shannon Tipton:

Tremendous. And Laura, Michelle and I, we always like to kick off the podcast conversation around the disruption that we've been having in 2020 and I cannot believe that it's September already. So the question that we like to start off with is, it's been many months since our daily lives were radically altered in response to the pandemic and as restrictions start easing around the world and hopefully start easing more fully around the world, it's clear that there's going to be an enduring impact on how we work and live. That's clear.

Shannon Tipton:

And so what I'd like to ask you both is what has changed for you and what has disruption meant for you or your businesses in the last few months. And Dani, I'll start with you.

Dani Johnson:

Yeah. I think COVID is scary. I think it scared everybody. It was a little bit of a shockabuku. If you don't know that word, it's a spiritual swift kick to the head that alters your reality forever. But as we've gotten into a little bit, we've realized that this is a really an opportunity to do something different, to rethink old broken ways of doing things that we've had in place just because of momentum and weed them out and replacing with things that really have a chance of working.

Shannon Tipton:

I really like that. It really does ... I love that. What was that word you used again?

Dani Johnson:

It's a word from a movie. It's shockabuku.

Shannon Tipton:

I like that.

Dani Johnson:

Shockabuku, a spiritual kick to the head that alters your reality.

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Shannon Tipton:

A spiritual kick to the head, thank you. Yeah. I think it's perfect, really. Thank you for sharing a new word with us. So Stella, what are your thoughts?

Stella Collins:

So for me, this year was already going to be really disruptive because I changed countries. I changed roles. And I really thought I was going to change the way I was working. And that I was going from working remotely and out of the office, to working in an office and then suddenly that was ripped out from my feet and I was back from working at home and working digitally. So in some ways, that was less disruptive but as a business, we were already focused on a highly blended approach to training where it has made us change and focus is we're just going to have to work just digitally for now, so whilst we will still have live classes. They will be live online classes. They won't be live face-to-face classes.

Shannon Tipton:

So you just had a challenge on top of a challenge?

Stella Collins:

I did. It's really hard to make new friends when you can't go out and see people.

Shannon Tipton:

Oh, that is so true. Good point. Well, and I think that that lends really nicely to the conversation that we're going to have here about technology and using technology to bring people together and to bring the industry together. This just opens up the conversation that I'd like to have around the bias against technology in learning and development. And in previous episodes, we've talked about rapidly changing business models and how L&D can support organizations to adapt and this means looking at people and technology in a different way.

Shannon Tipton:

And so I feel this example from Harvard Business Review and they made this point in a recent article. What they state here was contrary to popular belief, digital transformation is less about technology and more about people. You can pretty much buy any technology but your ability to adapt to an even more digital future depends on developing the next generation of skills, hosting the gap between talent supply and demand and future proofing your own and other's potential.

Shannon Tipton:

So here's my opening question for you. As a whole, the L&D industry is people focused and we continue to advocate for professional growth and development within organizations. That said, L&D is also singing from a technology perspective as a lagging indicator. There seems to be a fear or anxiety around learning technologies. Do you see this mentally, this mind shift changing as we progress through current events? So Stella, I'll start with you. What are your thoughts?

Stella Collins:

So I've seen it has been a big mind shift for a lot of people. I know some people who were before COVID happened, they would never have done digital training and all of a sudden,

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they're out there delivering digitally and really learning a lot and sharing and collaborating. But having said that, I talked to a client only this morning who works in sort of factory-based organization where they have a lot of industrial factory production, and all their training has been face-to-face and they just don't know what to do. Right now, they're kind of like, "Well, with all these uncertainty, we just may not do anything."

Stella Collins (07:41):

My suggestion to them was, "Well, while there's all these uncertainty, why not actually embrace the digital for now? You could choose to go back later on but maybe it's worth looking at it." Just now that reduces the uncertainty. It takes that uncertainty away and I think that's one of the reasons people are nervous of technology is because it's new. It's uncertain. They're not comfortable with it. And they feel that fear.

Shannon Tipton:

Yeah, so Dani, what are your thoughts about where that fear comes from?

Dani Johnson:

It's a really good question. I do think the mentally is changing but I've seen it go sort of both ways. And it depends on their fears, depends on which way they're going with it. I was actually just barely having this conversation with [Laura Overton 00:08:31] this morning. When COVID became a thing, what we saw with the conversations that were happening out there in cyber space was that organizations tended to be taking a gigantic step backward. So over the past five years or so, we've been talking a lot about personalization and really catering to the individual and the employee experience and all these really forward-thinking beautiful things.

Dani Johnson:

And when COVID hit, most L&D departments were like, "Oh no! We no longer have a classroom. What are we going to do? We need to put all of these stuff that we've been teaching in classrooms online." Basically, in the exact same format. So I think it's taken a while. I think the immediate reaction to COVID and some of these other things that have happened is how do I maintain control over what's going on in my world? And how do I do it at scale so that I'm not dinged by the organization?

Dani Johnson:

But in the last month or so, we've also seen it sort of rebound just a little bit. We're starting to see L&D organizations see that technology isn't something to be afraid and it's not something that is going to take over for them but it can be this huge enabler. So they start to look at things like data and how that can help drop people into the right experiences or platforms that can deliver things in more innovative. We start thinking about doing things that we've never done before instead of just trying to replicate the classroom online.

Shannon Tipton:

Yes.

Stella Collins:

There's a huge ... Sorry.

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Shannon Tipton:

Go ahead. No Stella, go ahead.

Stella Collins:

I was going to say I think there was a huge, as Dani says, right in the start of COVID, we just put everything online. We just give people content and we let them stay at home and they would just look at content. I kept having discussions with people at that point that content is not learning. Content is required, it's part of it but it is not learning. So just putting the content out there is not going to guarantee your people will change their behaviours, change their knowledge, change their skills or anything. I'm hoping that's going to start shifting but I'm not entirely convinced it has quite yet.

Dani Johnson:

Yeah, I think we have to fix it. I was talking to my co-founder Stacia Garr. She has a five-year-old who should be starting elementary school, kindergarten and they're trying to do it online. You can imagine 30 five-year-olds online trying to figure out everything, including all of the tech challenges like reverberations and echoes and things like that. It's been incredibly frustrating for them to figure that out and as I was thinking about it, I was like, "Okay, yeah. That's a five-year-old but we struggle with that as well. Just content being shoved at you through a screen is not learning. We have to figure it out differently.

Shannon Tipton:

And why is it that you think that we're approaching learning like that? If we were in "normal times" we would never do that. We would never say that, "Okay, let's put a classroom together and let's just have a facilitator stand in front of the room and just talk and have the participants read." We would never do that. So why is it that you think that we're falling backwards into this fear, if you will?

Dani Johnson:

First of all, I think we have been doing that for years and years and years. I don't-

Shannon Tipton:

Well, okay.

Shannon Tipton:

I was being generous.

Dani Johnson:

Haven't changed a whole lot. But I think the other reason is expediency, right? So everybody started working from home and all of a sudden, all of the rules changed and organizations needed to very quickly get their people up to speed on something that resembled sameness. So I think a lot of the really boring awful stuff that we've seen lately has to do with more with expediency than anything else.

Stella Collins:

And so we need to give organizations particularly individuals within an organizations a bit of a pat on the back for at least having a go because I've seen some great webinars, online learning sessions, call them what you like and I've seen some terrible ones but some of the terrible ones have just been because they're just literally some poor person who does not know how to use the technology effectively, doesn't know how to connect with people

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digitally. They could have a conversation like this but not with a larger group. And has just been sort of thrown in there and told, "Okay, just talk at people." And I think they should get a pat on the back for even having had a go because that's quite a scary thing to do.

Stella Collins:

And I think that's where a lot of it's come in that people haven't got the experience, so they haven't had time to actually devise anything better. And hopefully as time goes on, they're going to see better examples of how learning can ... Online can be really socially connected. It can be really interactive. We ran a program yesterday and we got an immediate response from somebody who we'd never worked with her before and she wrote back saying, "I woke up at two o'clock in the morning, so I've had two hours sleep before this session. I was really expecting I would probably fall asleep but I've been engaged. I've been spoken to." She was really inspired by what she experienced online.

Stella Collins:

So I think as more people get more experience of working online well, then that will start to shift. But I think right now, there isn't enough knowledge or experience or yeah, experience of what good online looks like.

Shannon Tipton:

Is it though? Is it that they haven't seen what good looks like, which could be part of this? Or is it the fact that we're not taking the time to really investigate the different technologies that are out there? So we're not taking the time to learn, investigate, play, be curious about different forms of technology and how those different forms of technology can help us move forward. So aside from that, what do you think is some of the underlying issues?

Dani Johnson:

I actually think it's mostly mindset. I think at the beginning of COVID we have had and have continued to have this incredible opportunity to do things differently. And technology should allow us to do things differently, not just do things more efficiently. As you mentioned Shannon, these technologies out there radically change the way that people have access to learning, and the way that people interact with each other. But a lot of times L&D departments are still sort of stuck in their, "Okay, we need learning objectives and then we need an assessment at the end." And so we are thinking very traditionally, very sort of factory classroom-esque about what kind of learning we're putting out, instead of sort of opening our minds to where people learn and how people learn and how we can engage people, and not putting a box around learning by integrating it into whatever else they're doing and all of those kinds of things. I'd love to hear what Stella thinks about this.

Stella Collins:

I still think there is a lack of experience for some people. They've never been on a good digital learning platform or program so they've never seen it, they don't know what it feels like. They have sat through lots of boring stuff, so I think that is part of it. I think there isn't the time to go exploring. I totally agree, there's all sorts of amazing things. And in some ways it's the tech itself because the tech evolves so fast. How do we keep up? I mean I have two colleagues who are highly techie and every week they introduced me to at least one more new tool. "Stella, look. We want to use this tool." And I keep saying, "Well, let's just assess whether the tool's going to do what we need it to do."

Stella Collins:

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And I like tech but if you're not interested in tech and you kind of see a tool and you think, "Well, maybe that's the tool." and then the next week there's another tool, another tool, another tool, how do you decide which tool is going to be able to do the job you need? And I agree you should start with what's the job we need first but just the speed of change in tech is its own problem in a way.

Shannon Tipton:

So there's an anxiety here?

Stella Collins:

Yeah. There's an anxiety and a pressure to keep up.

Shannon Tipton:

And so from a mindset shift or from a neuroscience perspective then, how does L&D manage the technology anxiety that it's feeling? As you said, there's a lot of different things that are happening right now and a lot of different options. So how do we manage that anxiety of not knowing what we feel like we should know?

Dani Johnson:

I mean two things come to mind. The first one is look at it as an opportunity and the second one is learn what you should know. Knowledge is power. I mean if you're sort of crippled by the fact that you don't know what's going on out there, the best way to get over that is to figure out what's going on out there. I don't think the world is going to radically change. I don't think we're going to backstep a lot away from technology. I think we've accelerated a lot over this last year and I don't think it's going away. So if L&D organizations aren't comfortable with it, they better get comfortable with it pretty quick.

Stella Collins:

I agree. We do need to get comfortable with it but I think people need to be perhaps led, shown, demonstrated and maybe there needs to be somebody out there who says, "Look, for now these are the ..." I mean you get people who do this, [Mike Taylor 00:17:59]. These are the 10 best tools you can use right now but actually maybe some more guidance around it because I think in L&D, we very much focus on the learning, which is what we should be focusing on and getting people to do the jobs they need to do. But L&D need to be ... I'm going to say L&D. There is no such thing as L&D. There's people who work in the sector.

Stella Collins:

If you're not familiar with it, you probably need to be led quite slowly. You need to learn yourself and right now, people are panicking. They haven't got time to do the learning themselves because they're being asked by the organization to deliver something that they don't know how to do. And that's not their fault, I don't think.

Dani Johnson:

I do.

Stella Collins:

Oh okay.

Dani Johnson:

I have to be harsh.



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Shannon Tipton:

I'll just sit back, okay.

Dani Johnson:

I think it is their fault. I mean this didn't sneak up on us. It's been happening for years and years and years. I don't think change takes as long as we think it takes. And just an example of that, we were talking to an organization that was going to put an LXP into place and they had like a year and a half roadmap to roll people in and teach them how to work it, blah, blah, blah, blah and then COVID happened. And everybody was online within three weeks and up and going.

Dani Johnson:

I think some of these tools are very intuitive and very easy to use and can incorporate into the way that you're already working. I worry about those organizations, those L&D organizations that need to be led by the hand. I think the world is going too fast for that. I think they need to take the initiative and get out there and do it. A little tough love.

Stella Collins:

And I agree. I totally think this whole idea when you used to have a change program to implement a new system or the new version of a system. It's crazy. People at home pick up tools and technology and they just use it. But I still think if you're an L&D person who's ... even if you're interested in the tech, I mean I am interested in the tech but I still kind of every week I'm kind of like thinking, "Which bit of tech do we want to use? Which is the best one? Which is going to be the easiest to support our learners?"

Stella Collins:

So I think there are a lot of decisions for people to make and it's hard when there's a lot of information out there and a lot of conflicting information. So tough love but you need support for tough love as well. You need to know where to go for that support.

Shannon Tipton:

Well, I think that as L&D practitioners this is something that we tell our participants often, which is we expect them to own their learning, right? That they should be owners of their professional development. So why is it then that the expectation is not the same for L&D practitioners? Why is it that we're not telling them or other L&D practitioners about technology that they should own their own learning as far as moving forward and understanding what's out there and how it can be used?

Stella Collins:

And I agree. We should be owning our own within ... That's hard to say. Within L&D, we should be owning our own learning. So maybe we're on the learning journey. I think it's just a bit hard to expect that people are going to change instantly, that there is a learning journey they're going to have to go on in order to go from being ... Some people are already along that route but not everybody is.

Shannon Tipton:

Right.

Stella Collins:

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So you've got to kind of take stock of the fact that for some people, it's going to take a bit longer because they started later for whatever reason.

Dani Johnson:

I think that's a really merciful way to look at it. I do. I absolutely do. I'm just wondering if organizations are going to have the patience to wait for L&D to catch up. I mean that's been a constant conversation for the last 10 years, "Is L&D going to stay relevant? Is there even going to be an L&D organization?"

Stella Collins:

I think that is where some of that fear comes from because I think people are thinking, "Will my job be taken over by e-learning? Will virtual reality mean that we can just have an avatar delivering training?" I think there is some of that fear and, "Can I catch up enough in order to supplant the ..." I mean AI is going to be really, really useful. VR's already useful in lots of ways but it's never going to be a complete replacement even if what your job is changes to being, "Well, I can select the best digital technology to do the best job."

Dani Johnson:

No, and I absolutely agree with that. I think one of the reasons that L&D folks have this fear is because they see it as a replacement for what they do. When in actuality, it's just an augmentation to what they do. So if they are taking advantage of AI to help them curate, then all of a sudden they're not in a back room going through tons and tons of worksheets to see which ones are the best. And if they're using virtual reality then they're not creating these gigantic simulations. And there are all kinds of tools that are involved in this technological discussion that help L&D do their job better. I guess that's what I mean by mindset like they've got to embrace it as an augmentation to what they do, instead of seeing it as a threat or something that's going to be "hard to learn."

Stella Collins:

I suppose what I'm seeing though is people are exploring it. They are embracing it. They are sharing ideas. I'm seeing lots of organizations who are talking to either specialists or within their organizations, they're actually saying, "Well what can we do? What can we use? How can we make this better?"

Dani Johnson:

I completely agree. I see more of a bias toward technology than away from it at this point.

Stella Collins:

Yeah, I do too.

Shannon Tipton:

Okay, that's great. That's a great conversation. So now, let's think about or let's move this towards how can we help the industry then? So there is that mindset of technology is going to replace my job, right? How is it that we can guide L&D to realize that there is a symbiotic relationship here? It's not going to take away from what they do but it's actually going to augment what they do. So what does that conversation feel like for you? How would you advise L&D practitioners who might have this fear that's sitting in the back of their heads that they're not expressing?

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Dani Johnson:

I mean I hate to keep coming back to this but I think it's a get-your-hands-dirty sort of job. I think you need to sort of get in there and take a look at stuff. I haven't met an L&D professional that isn't forward thinking but doesn't do demos with vendors just to see what's out there. It isn't taking a look at the research around that kind of stuff. And so I think if someone's waiting for the IT department to hand something down so that they can then execute on it, they're giving up a lot of their power first of all and they're giving up the fun part of their job. They should be out there exploring and experimenting on themselves and figuring out what works and what doesn't and trying to figure out how that can be integrated into what they're doing. I think it's a 100% do-it-yourself job.

Stella Collins:

I think it's a mix of curiosity and pragmatism. So I think it's about getting curious about, "Well, what is out there and what is possible and how could we use it?" And most L&D people are curious. That's often why they get into training because they're kind of curious about people. So maybe now they've got to get curious about, "Well, how can I help people but use the digital to augment that support?" But I think also, and this again comes back to what examples have you seen. As a pragmatist, I find it much easier to understand things. If somebody can show me, can give me an example of, I don't mean visually show me but give me an example of.

Stella Collins:

So I think as there are more examples out there of what good looks like, then I think people will be able to say, "Cool. That looks really good and I'd really like to do that. How do I do that?" But I think if we don't show the examples of what good looks like, then it's just a big amorphous, "Well, I don't what is possible." So I think sharing good practice I guess is what it is or sharing terrible experiments. "Hey, this was really rubbish. Help me. How can I do it better?" And actually that would work because L&D love to help people, don't they? So.

Dani Johnson:

Right. Well, one of the points that was made in the HBR article that I mentioned and which we'll link to in the show notes is it makes the point of, in this right now, if you can't fail fast, make sure you succeed slowly. And I love that point because I think that as an industry, we're just sort of afraid to fail because we want to be seen as the subject matter experts. There's a trust element here, a credibility element. So now what they're encouraging is well then if you don't want to fail, then take some time to succeed. So what do you think about that approach?

Stella Collins:

I actually think that's really difficult.

Shannon Tipton:

Okay.

Dani Johnson:

I agree.

Stella Collins:

Because if you're worried about losing your job, you really don't want to fail. You're feeling nervous and if you fail and then the CEO says, "Well, you failed rubbishly, you're out." That's

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going to be really frightening. If you take time to work out what's required and work out the best way to do it, you might also get challenged because well why is it not happening immediately. So I think that is actually putting people in ... Neither option is a good option.

Shannon Tipton:

Well, so then maybe-

Stella Collins:

Maybe you've got to work out what your organization, what their culture is and if they're a fail fast culture, then go with it but if they're not, then don't.

Shannon Tipton:

So then what is your suggestion? I hear a lot of what I refer to as, "Yeah but, yes but." So we say try Zoom, try Slack, try other methods of communication and collaboration and I hear, "Yes, but." Okay, so then if we say that if you're part of an organization that allows for failing fast, then go for it but if you're not, then don't. So then what? What do we say to the L&D practitioners that say, "Yes, but?"

Dani Johnson:

I think failing is a part of life. I mean it's a part of everything. I don't think there's a fail. I mean I do know organizations that are much more sort of in tune to failure but every organization fails, every human fails. Failure is how we learn a lot. And so I think it's time for L&D to embrace that. If you think about sort of our job for the last hundred years and Shannon, you alluded to this, our job has been to keep people from failing. We teach them the things that they know so that they don't fail, that they don't script the system we have in place, so that everything goes smoothly.

Dani Johnson:

And then we grade people in their performance reviews on how much they did or did not fail. Which I think is ridiculous because some of the some of the best things have come out of failures. And some of the best growth has come out of failures. Two things come to mind. The first one was an organization I talked to a little while ago where the CEO actually requires his senior leadership team to fail. So he requires four failures a year. Those aren't things that they tried and went well. He actually requires four intelligent failures a year where they actually put the time in to make a decision, took the risk and then failed. And because he did that, they were much further along because they were much better at innovating and moving forward and trying new things.

Dani Johnson:

Failure was not stigmatized. The second thing that comes to mind is I have a master's degree in mechanical engineering. So this is an obvious career choice for me but when I was in engineering school, one of the things that we were told over and over and over again is to keep a lab book. And in that lab book goes all your successes and goes all of your failures. And you look at that stuff in that lab book as data. It's not successes and failures. It's things that worked in this situation and things that didn't work in this situation.

Dani Johnson:

And so I think L&D has lots and lots of power to change the conversation about failure in organizations by starting with themselves and looking at things like this. I was talking to a CLO of a large telecommunications company and we were talking about how some

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technologies fail and some technologies don't. And she said, "Sometimes things just die and that's okay." It is okay. It's okay if technologies don't work. It's okay if something doesn't work. The mistake is leaving it in there longer than is necessary to realize that it failed, and not recognizing it as a failure and pulling it out.

Dani Johnson:

I think we have a lot of power in changing the mindset of people about the way we present failure and the opportunities that we give them to learn and how we build the management training that helps them recognize failure and the opportunities to learn. And I don't think very many L&D departments take advantage of it.

Stella Collins:

And I think that's where, as you're talking about sort of an engineering methodology, a scientific methodology is also really valid. I was just listening to a radio program when the Higgs boson was about to either be discovered or there wasn't one and they didn't know. And they were talking to a physicist at CERN and they said to this physicist, "You've spent your entire career working out what this Higgs boson looks like and you're about to find out whether this exists or not. How are you going to feel if you don't find it?" He's all, "Well, I really don't mind because either way, I'll have learned something and I can move on from there."

Stella Collins:

So that idea of failing to do something actually gives you the data to do something different is I think that is really powerful. I think one of the other really interesting things. So being curious about failure and I'm doing some investigation into curiosity at the moment and I found out the other day, the same part of your brain, I mean literally the same part of your brain records failure and fear. Dopamine stimulates part of the same part. If it's at the back of the nucleus accumbens, you feel fear and if it's at the front, you feel curiosity. So they're actually on a kind of some kind of continuum almost. It's the same part of our brain. I don't quite know how that works in terms of the real world yet but maybe we can just get really curious about failure and have that scientific or engineering mindset of, "But why? How can we make it work next time?"

Dani Johnson:

Yeah, all that.

Shannon Tipton:

Right. I am enjoying this and Dani, you just gave me a great idea. I record what I'm doing and the projects that I'm working on obviously. So I have my different notebooks for that but I think a really good technique that I heard you say was the lab book. You talk about a low tech solution but really when you're working through different technology experiments to track that, what worked, what didn't work, why didn't it work, I think that that is a really fabulous idea that any L&D professional right now could take and run with, especially if they're in the beginning part of their journey trying to figure out what works for what purpose.

Shannon Tipton:

So thank you for that. That's a great-

Dani Johnson:

Sure thing.

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Shannon Tipton:

... great little nugget that I got out of that conversation but-

Dani Johnson:

Old habits die hard. I carry one with me everywhere I go.

Shannon Tipton:

There are those notebooks around, absolutely. I would like to have a conversation if you don't mind about technology and trust. Is there a trust issue around technology that is regardless of failure but is it that we don't necessarily trust it to do what it says it's going to do? And also, is it that technology is starting to encroach in our lives and we don't necessarily trust its placement in our lives right now? So what are your thoughts about that?

Shannon Tipton:

I read an article about organizations and that they they're putting these programs and processes in place to ensure that people are doing what they're supposed to be doing. Is trust really going to be an issue within learning in regards to technology?

Dani Johnson:

Oh yeah. We focus quite a bit on people analytics as well and there's a whole conversation going on right now about ethics and data and people analytics, and what you track and what you don't track, and what enables trust and what doesn't enable trust. The article that you mentioned I've read and it made me physically ill. The idea of tracking someone's time to make sure that they're on task is irrelevant in a world like today. We're not just focusing on efficiencies anymore. How do you accommodate those thinking times and how do you accommodate the times that I'm not at my computer but still thinking about things? It's a very unfair way to look at how somebody is performing and it just makes me sick.

Dani Johnson:

I think organizations that implement those types of things, they must have terrible relationships with their people. I think they're terrible. I can't say enough about that. I just think it's a horrible way to enable trust.

Stella Collins:

And yes, there's always been organizations that do that, haven't there? I mean people used to have check-in cards and check-out cards and they were measured on the amount of widgets they produced for instance, whether they were good widgets or bad widgets. Who cares? They just produce lots of widgets. So I think there's always been that concern around trust and do we trust our employees to do the job that we employed them to do. And those companies who don't trust, I don't think they're ever going to have good relationships with their employees.

Dani Johnson:

I think it's a really interesting question though because some of the technologies that we're seeing now for learning and development and just information, they gather digital exhaust or latent data in organizations and are able to tell you a lot about what's actually going on. And these things are all really good. The problem is that data is forever. So you might have a really good leader in place at a given time who's using that data in the best way possible. But what happens when you get a leader that isn't good in there that still has access to all

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that information? It's a really interesting conversation and I'm not sure we have many answers yet.

Stella Collins:

And I think the whole thing about skewed data is also really important. We know that data is heavily skewed in all sorts of ways. So you've got the good or the bad data and then how it's used but is that a really good set of data or is there a whole part of it missing? So I think there's so much around data that people can trust or not trust and it probably depends on their awareness of how data is used.

Dani Johnson:

Yeah.

Shannon Tipton:

So is L&D complicit here?

Dani Johnson:

Of course. We're all complicit. And I think probably more so.

Stella Collins:

I'm not sure I'm more complicit than anybody else in the business.

Dani Johnson:

Maybe not, except that I really do think L&D has a lot of unrecognized power organizations to change the way people think about things. And so if they are treating data in a certain way, that's one thing but if they're either not making sure that everybody else is on the same page about data. Or I'm not even sure how to explain it but not making it clear to managers how they should be using that data correctly. I think they're maybe just a little bit more complicit than others. Or can be.

Shannon Tipton:

Right, and now if we think about learning technologies in general, the other part of trust I think from an L&D perspective is a lot of times for example, Stella, you talked about a blended solution. So here you might be doing a classroom in a virtual situation such as this. And then you blend that with a collaborative program such as let's say, Slack for example and then sometimes L&D will come back and say, "Well, how do I trust that the participants are doing what I need them to be doing if it's not in the learning management system, if it's not tracked in that way?"

Shannon Tipton:

So now let's look at trust from a different perspective is how is L&D going to manage that control, that trust and control, command and control I guess when it comes from a learning perspective?

Stella Collins:

I don't think they should be managing it or controlling it. I think one of the roles of L&D is to talk to the business first and find out what are the needs of people in the business, what are the skills we need, what's the knowledge of information we need. And then it's a marketing job. Sell that to the people who need to have the skills and make them want. I want the skills so that you don't have to worry that they're not going to complete the course or whatever it is

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because they will want to learn. They will be curious. They will understand the benefit of learning, whatever it is, in order to do their job better and support their organization, support their colleagues.

Stella Collins:

So I don't think L&D should be responsible for controlling any more than they should be responsible for ticking off who comes into the training room. I could never understand that. If they come, they come and if they don't, well they had a reason for not coming and it was probably a good reason.

Dani Johnson:

I've seen some L&D organizations divide what they do into the need to know versus the nice to know. I'm not sure that those are necessarily the right ways of thinking about it but those things that are compliance, you obviously have to buckle down on their industry organizations that are going to make sure that you do that. But that is a completely different thing. In one organization we talked to, that type of learning was on a completely different platform and was actually controlled by OGC, the Office of General Counsel rather than the L&D department.

Dani Johnson:

And so what they did was exactly what Stella was saying is they said, "Hey, listen. We're a learning culture and we have all these opportunities for you to learn. And you probably have a better idea of what skills you need because you're on the front line than we could ever decide you need. So here's this huge platform and all this information. Go to it and let us know what else we can do to help you." Whereas those things that most people are really worried about were routed through OGC because it was a completely different thing.

Shannon Tipton:

So then

Stella Collins:

I think-

Shannon Tipton:

I'm sorry. Go ahead Stella.

Stella Collins:

Sorry, I was just going to say I think you find that a lot in organizations that the technical things people need to do their job, they can't do their job without often doesn't sit within the L&D team. That often sits within an operational team somewhere or the budget doesn't sit within L&D. So they get those things done and then I think for instance selling to the IT specialist or the AI specialist in your team, that actually they also need to maybe do some communication skills training. I think that's about persuading them and influencing them that that would actually really enhance their career. So they don't next time step on somebody's toes or really upset their colleagues. That would enhance their career and that to me is about a sales and marketing job.

Shannon Tipton:

True. We need more marketing.

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Stella Collins:

Yeah.

Shannon Tipton:

So then how would you advise an L&D person who said, "Well, this sort of technology Teams or Slack or what have you, I don't feel comfortable with that because I can't track the people and the conversations on it."

Dani Johnson:

I would ask them why they want to track it. A lot of times when you ask L&D folks why they want to track it, it's because they want credit for the "learning" that's happening in the organization and what needs to happen is L&D needs to change their mindset from this is what I provided to this is how I'm enabling the organization to do what they want. And those are completely different metrics. They still have those metrics but they're looking more at correlations and they're bringing in information from other types of organizations like quality or finance or sales or whatever to see what they're doing and how that correlates with what the business results are. It's a completely different mindset when it comes to measurement but one I think needs to happen as we move forward.

Stella Collins:

Yeah, I agree.

Shannon Tipton:

Right. Which is a common refrain that I seem to hear. So what I'm gathering from this is looking at tech more as an enabler. So tech can enable us to help push learning cultures forward without having to be concerned about controlling that learning culture.

Dani Johnson:

Yes. Yeah.

Stella Collins:

I don't think it was ever about or don't think it should ever have been about control. It's about creating an environment where learning can happen. People learn naturally. So why do you need to control it? It's about supporting it and providing opportunities where appropriate but not controlling it.

Shannon Tipton:

Right. Well, that's the million-dollar question, isn't it? Yeah, why do many L&D departments or practitioners, why do they feel the need to try to control the learning that's around them? And some of them use technology to enhance that and others avoid it because it does not help them in that spectrum.

Dani Johnson:

Right.

Shannon Tipton

And so now how do we then help ... What sort of takeaways could we give an L&D person right now that would say this is how technology can help you and this is and these are some techniques that you can use to get to know what's out there?

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Dani Johnson:

There's lots of research on learning tech. We do a ton of it. There's a guy named Christopher Lind that does a podcast every week where he talks to a different tech vendor, sort of

Shannon Tipton:

Oh wow. What's the name of that podcast?

Dani Johnson:

It's called Learning Sharks. Christopher Lind is brilliant. He works at GE. He handles their global ... I'm going to get his title wrong but I think he's a global learning technology guru is what he does. And he does very insightful interviews about what's going on and what their philosophy is and all those types of things. And then I go back to, there's stuff out there. So start exploring and don't be afraid. I think that developing a culture of making failure okay actually starts with L&D. Don't be afraid to fail. Just try stuff, see what happens.

Stella Collins:

And ask other people. Ask your friends. Ask colleagues. Ask not even the people you work with within L&D but ask your partners what happens in your department, how do they use technology and just be curious about it. Read widely. Yeah, just be open, be curious, be open to all the possibilities. And also, I think look at what are you doing in your day-to-day life, not just when you're at work? What are you doing at home? Why couldn't you use that at work? Lots of people have Siri or Alexa at home. Well, how could they use that at work or use a similar type of technology?

Stella Collins:

So I think making connections between other parts of your life and work, which I think in some way is easier now that people are working from home very often.

Shannon Tipton:

All right, they've got to be creative.

Stella Collins:

Yeah.

Shannon Tipton:

Right. So it is about that creative mindset, about looking at different technologies and thinking about how can we then make this work within an organization, right?

Dani Johnson:

Yeah. I mean I think that curiosity that Stella's been talking about is really important. Like having that curiosity to go out and find things but one of the things that I would caution folks against is looking at all these options and trying to shoehorn it into what the organization is doing. I think there's like a galaxy of things out there and what you're looking for is the constellation of technologies that are going to work for your organization.

Stella Collins:

So I think again, it's being clear. It isn't about what are you trying to achieve. What are you trying to help people do? And then ask with that question in mind then say so, "This is what

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we need to do." So what tools are out there? It's the same as if you were building a house. What tools do you actually need to do it and which are not relevant to you, depending on whether you're building a wood shack or a 25-million-pound mansion. You'd need different tools potentially.

Dani Johnson:

Yeah, RedThread a couple of years ago and it's continued to sort of evolve but we put together sort of this framework to help people think through the types of technologies that they can use and what they're trying to accomplish with those. And we also talk to vendors weekly and in our newsletter put a small brief little blurb about each one of those vendors to help people understand what's out there. And then there's also an online tool where you can say, "I want to do this." And it'll sort of pop up the vendors that say that they do those things.

Dani Johnson:

So just things like that are out there. We're just one of many I'm sure. Things like that are out there and just sort of familiarizing yourself with them and being very clear as Stella said about what you're trying to accomplish and not getting caught up in the new and shiny is what we would recommend.

Shannon Tipton:

Right. So maybe building a learning plan for themselves, right?

Dani Johnson:

Sure, yeah. I don't know about Stella or you, Shannon, but I read like an hour every day. I have a feed that I go through every day to make sure that I'm staying up to speed on what's going on out there.

Shannon Tipton:

Right. Which I think there's another part of this conversation. So it's using technology to keep yourself informed.

Stella Collins:

Absolutely. Yeah, it's a really easy way to keep informed. I mean there are all sorts of digests and it sounds like your research is doing the same, Dani, that there are digests out there that you can access. And then there are people who regularly share these sort of things by following them on Twitter or LinkedIn or whatever your platform of preference is. You can get the highlights and then you can dig deeper if you find something that seems to fit your requirement.

Shannon Tipton:

So find those people, practice-

Stella Collins:

Yeah, find and follow.

Shannon Tipton:

Right. Find people to follow. That's great. Well, that leads me then to the next part of our conversation, which is concluding each podcast with our series, our rapid-fire questions here, which is I'm going to start with you, Stella. So our rapid-fire question. What does L&D need to stop doing to help businesses promote technology?

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Stella Collins:

I think they need to ... and I know lots of people say this all in at the time. They need to stop taking orders from this is what we need and start analysing the problem to understand what's really needed as opposed to the order of I think a manager or a department says this is what we need. So I think it's yeah, stop taking orders, start analysing.

Shannon Tipton:

Okay. Dani?

Dani Johnson:

I think they need to loosen up a little bit. I think they need to quit being afraid of failing and I think they need to learn to make decisions. They need to stop making decisions so slowly. A decision is better than a decision that takes a really long time.

Stella Collins:

I think a decision allows you then to move, doesn't it? Allows you to shift.

Dani Johnson:

Agreed.

Shannon Tipton:

Right. Okay, so then that's a great lead-in to what does L&D need to start doing to move the needle to bring technology appropriately into their organizations? So I'll start with Dani.

Dani Johnson:

I think they need to ... I hear the term all the time, "We need a seat at the table." I think they need to quit assuming that they don't have one and just sit down. Start getting into the conversations about what the organization needs. That's the only way they're going to get the information they need in order to make good decisions about tech.

Stella Collins:

Nice one. I like that idea.

Shannon Tipton:

I know. Stealing that answer.

Stella Collins:

I agree. I think they need to start experimenting scientifically. Test things out with a hypothesis. This could be a good tool for us because and then just test it, measure it. Is it a good tool for you? And it may not be right for this task but actually, oh, I'll connect it with that one over there. It might be a really good tool for ...

Shannon Tipton:

Excellent. So then, which is a great ... I love these answers are just dovetailing together. So then what can L&D do to accelerate? So they're doing something now. Now they need to light a fire underneath it. So what do they need to accelerate, Stella?

Stella Collins:

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So this is a weird thing to say in terms of accelerate but I think first before they accelerate, they actually need to stop and reflect. And then take action. So stop and reflect, work out. What was the result of our experiment? What have we learned from it? And then take action.

Shannon Tipton:

Okay, awesome. Dani?

Dani Johnson:

I think they need to find evangelists and sub-organizations that are willing to experiment and try step out on them.

Shannon Tipton:

Be my guinea pig.

Dani Johnson:

Pretty much, yeah. Some things happen, you guinea pig it and then you land and expand.

Shannon Tipton:

Yes. Well, this has been a really fascinating conversation about technologies, why we do the things we do, what's driving our mindset and how we can continue to help organizations move forward. And I really like the conversation that we were having about learning from failure, which plug find the Learning Uncut emergent series Learning from Failure.

Shannon Tipton:

That was a really great conversation. I think that if you listen to both of those podcasts, you would get some really incredible information about technologies and where we can go and where it can go from here. The time has just flown. We're already almost at our hour here. And it's been a wonderful conversation and I thank you both for contributing.

Shannon Tipton:

I'd like to turn the time over to you. So Dani, where can people find you? You mentioned the framework for technologies. I'm sure our listeners would love to know more about that. Where can they find you and this piece of information?

Dani Johnson:

Yeah, I'm pretty active on LinkedIn and on Twitter. And you can find us at redthreadresearch.com. We're ramping up a membership right now. Memberships are free. You can have access to all the tools and frameworks that I mentioned through the end of September.

Shannon Tipton:

So jump on it.

Dani Johnson:

Yeah.

Shannon Tipton:

Excellent. Okay, Stella?

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Stella Collins:

Again, Twitter and LinkedIn are probably my platforms of preference. And you can find out what we do at Stellar Labs at stellarlabs.eu.

Shannon Tipton:

Excellent. And so Stella, do you have any webinars that are coming up that people would be interested in knowing about?

Stella Collins:

We haven't got a webinar because we don't really do webinars as webinars. But we have got some blended live learning digital programs coming up. One of them on Learning to Learn in October.

Shannon Tipton:

I think that's very appropriate to our conversation. Learning to learn. So everybody needs to go in and find that piece of information out on your website. And again, we'll have that all in the show notes. Any last comments before we go today?

Dani Johnson:

Just thank you very much Shannon for the opportunity to participate. This was really a good time.

Shannon Tipton:

Thank you so much.

Stella Collins:

Yeah, and thank you. It was really interesting to talk to both of you.

Stella Collins:

I've learned stuff, so I'm going to go and I'm going to go and join Dani's ...

Dani Johnson:

Oh, thank you.

Shannon Tipton:

I know! So am I. I'm going to go find that framework. That's so fascinating.

Stella Collins:

Yeah.

Shannon Tipton:

Well, thank you so much and ladies, you have a wonderful rest of your day. Stella, enjoy the rest of your evening and thank you for taking time to be a part of this.

Stella Collins:

Thank you.

Shannon Tipton:



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And you Dani, enjoy Salt Lake City.

Dani Johnson:

I will.

Shannon Tipton:

All right, goodbye for now.