

Learning Uncut Disruption Series
Laura Overton and Donald H Taylor – Learning Profession
Demands & Opportunities
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to the first in this special learning uncut disruption series. I'd like to welcome our first two guests, Donald H. Taylor and Laura Overton, who many of you will know as leading practitioners in the global Learning and Development profession, who between them have many years of experience and have seen the shape of learning shift and change over the past 30 plus years. So I've invited them today to help give some context around where we're at now, how that has a bearing on the way we're responding across the learning profession to the current crisis and disruption and what we might be able to do to handle this as well as we can and as we move out of the current situation.

So Laura, I'd like to start with you. You've been researching and analysing the impact and practices of learning teams around the globe for over 15 years. Can you give us some context on the current state of organisation Learning in recent years prior to the COVID-9 pandemic.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, I think some of the work that I was doing, looking at this whole focus is about what we're trying to do to change, and how we have changed in the last 15 years. And certainly, we've seen a lot of changes happening to the way that we work and the organisational context. And there's certainly been a lot of talk around how Learning and Development can deliver change. But historically, we have been very much tied to delivering courses and platforms have changed over the last 15 years, certainly in terms of how we might be wanting to deliver our courses, but still over 50% of what we deliver in a typical Learning and Development team is delivered through the classroom. And it has been that despite our interest in Learning Management Systems and eLearning and content, and live online learning, but I think one of the things that we've seen the most, or I've certainly seen in the work that I've been doing, is the fact that those organisations who are starting to look broader than just the courses into how do we actually start delivering business outcomes. They are starting to look at more creative and innovative ways of bringing learning to that organisation. And actually the high performing learning organisations are not just producing courses, whether online or face to face, but they're also shifting or have been shifting into working much more collectively and collaboratively with individuals with teams, specifically working on organisational goals. But that's quite rare still, and but yet it delivers incredible business value. And I think that's really the kind of patterns that we've seen, certainly through the research that's been backed up by other sources as well over the last 15 years.

Michelle Ockers:

So Don, have you got anything you'd like to add about the state of the profession and readiness to respond to the current crisis? Have we been caught off guard?

Donald H Taylor:

I think everybody's been caught off guard. And Laura is right when she says it's rare for these high performing practices to be common. And my research, which I do with the annual global Sentiment Survey, looks at how new ideas are adopted in Learning and Development. And it's not so much that we're being caught off guard that worries me, Michelle, but more

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the fact that the willingness or the ability of Learning and Development at work to change is hampered by something. I don't know what it is, but it makes that rate of change slow. I look at an annual survey it goes to something like 2000 people, and typically, the respondents come from the innovators and the early adopters. It in my research takes something like one to two years for an idea to move from the innovators to the early adopters. Typically, these are people who are running to the left-hand side of innovation curve. Suddenly, we're in a position where the early majority and the late majority, the people who are in the middle who make up the vast majority of this are all being propelled into an area where they're having to change what they're doing very quickly. They need guidance, they need help to do it. And understand that's what you're doing with your podcast. Fortunately, there are lots of other people who are also helping out with this, Michelle, sharing ideas, not a moment too soon. The issue is whether people whatever it is that holds people back from changing faster, whether they're going to be able to speed up the rate of change, and adopt new, not just technologies, but working practices and ideas and approaches which will enable us to work in this new environment.

Laura Overton:

I'd like to pick up on what you've just said there, Don, because traditionally, over the last number of years that we've been working together, that change has been. We talk about a lot in our profession and talk about the need and the evidence has been building. And we've been talking about accelerated change in the world of work. But now the game has fundamentally changed for anybody in the workplace. We've completely redefined what environments that we're working in and we need to work in. It's creating a more level playing field. The good news is that we have a serious amount of evidence that has built up about how we can add business value back into the organisation. And now is the time for all of us to be sharing that and connecting with each other to support and new journeys, in this new world of work.

Michelle Ockers:

Laura, can I just ask a question there? You're talking about adding business value. In terms of the demands on learning professionals right now - we're kind of in many countries, certainly here in Australia and not sure, potentially UK and US, we're still at almost ground zero in terms of a response. Some people are just tied up with a response. Where does consideration of adding business value fit into this? And how can people incorporate that into how they're responding right now?

Laura Overton:

I think for me, personally, I'm actually sitting here recording this from Spain, where we're in total lockdown, and has been incredible the acceleration between arriving last week and being careful and washing our hands to being confined to our apartments. And I think the business value is from a Learning and Development professional isn't just about hey, I can pump new content out to your home, but the environment in which I'm working and the news that I'm being fed, in my local context, is really very, very significant. The value I think, that learning professionals can offer into that new world is how do we help people feel safe, feel safe in their work, feel safe in their jobs, be able to adapt to that change, when they are being pumped with all kinds of different information, what's fact what's not, what do I can even find out about my own organisation? How do I adapt to this new world quickly? It's not a sales opportunity for those of us who have been involved in technology enabled learning. It really isn't. What it is, is a really emotional environment that people are finding themselves in and the value that we can add is around safety itself. Around information. It's around

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equipping, and helping individuals who are physically isolated, to actually feel connected and listen to.

Michelle Ockers:

Don, would you like to add they're around any other elements of opportunity you're seeing or the demands or needs that the profession – can be rising to right now in organisations?

Donald H Taylor

Yes, I can. I'd like to just pick up on what Laura said and continue it. The question of business I think is very important business value. The course delivered face to face has been the default method of training for as long as we've been in the field. That has now changed. It is not possible for organisations to shift all of that work onto a virtual environment. In the short term, it simply is too much work. So your question, what about the business side of it? I think is the key triage question here. A lot of people will be saying this is easy. I'll do this. I'll do that. And the answer is no. The question you ask is to sort out what courses are you going to adjust? How you adjust them is, which has the greatest business impact. So the opportunity now for Learning and Development is to say, How do I know which has the greatest business impact. I better go back and find out pretty quickly, which of these courses are crucial. So that's the first thing. The second thing is that this is difficult work to do in a hurry. And when you're changing things in a hurry, it's very easy to try to change lots of things, and you end up with a mess. I'd say change one thing. You can do an awful lot online, but if you're not doing it already, it's going to be complicated to do. Focus on one thing and then probably the most important thing to do right now is to shift your physical face to face courses into some form of online analogy. Now that may simply be getting people to deliver stuff online. Now, that may not be perfect. It may be a poor way of doing it in some ways. But for me, it's the first step towards establishing familiarity with the tools on the part of the delivery staff, and on the part of the participants to understand that there is a new way of learning that's analogous to how they used to do it. We have to be careful about doing about getting bad old practice and making it bad new practice in a different way - lipstick on a pig. But I think we're conscious of that we can do a good job. So the opportunity there is let's make sure that we're being really conscious about how we do this rather than simply automatically doing a bunch of PowerPoints online.

There was a third point, Laura, which is very quickly the closest analogy to this that I've got is 9/11. After 9/11 all pretty much transport in the US stopped for a period of time, there was a big move as well. out of it online, online training because people couldn't get to places to deliver stuff physically. There was also a creation of a tremendous amount of really poor eLearning at that time, which was click next courses. We must avoid doing that this time around. Laura. Sorry.

Laura Overton:

I absolutely agree with you that we need to be focusing on doing a number of things and doing them well. But I think also, we need to be thinking about does this environment create an opportunity for us, maybe out of necessity, for doing things completely differently? I'm recently teaming up with Jos Arets and Vivian and Charles Jennings from the 702010 Institute to look at this in a much wider perspective. Because sometimes we need to think about how do we redefine what we offer to an organisation as a learning professional. And I think that the new environment and the new world of work means that perhaps we're going to need to do things completely differently in order to achieve those outcomes, and I think the focus on formal causes absolutely will continue. But the mix and how we actually support individuals in the context of their work environment, in the emotional context, in the new

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context, in the uncertain context, absolutely is going to need to change as well. And I think that's, that's exciting for us because we perhaps as a profession, might have permission to do things differently to achieve the business outcomes that's so important for the individuals and also for the organisation itself.

Michelle Ockers:

I think there's a point here too, I'd like to circle back to Laura. You raise the issue of right now we need to be looking at how we can help people to feel safe to adapt quickly to the changes they're being asked to make to how they work. And there's also a point here about looking after our own well-being from both the physical and emotional perspective because we have a role to hold the space for others so that they can get on with their learning. So did you have any comments on what we can do to take care of ourselves as learning professionals so we're showing up in the right way at the moment through a period such as this?

Laura Overton:

Well, I know I've personally experienced at the moment that you know, sometimes letting go of what has defined as success can be actually a very vulnerable situation. And I think one of the things that we can do in this in this new world of work is to be able to connect and engage directly with each other, which is why, you know, I'm loving revisiting some of the Learning Uncut podcasts in terms of some of the practical ideas that have already been shared, but also these types of environments of bringing people together to be able to share how are we adapting? How are we learning? How do we learn from each other? And I think that kind of safety can be helped by us connecting with each other as a learning community and you know, the Learning Skills Group as well as a fabulous global environment in which to be able to come together and to share our ideas and our concerns. So I think that's one of the things that we that we can do is to take advantage of social distancing, to be able to increase our connection with each other and also armed with new levels of knowledge, new opportunities to experiment, without fear. And I think the fear factor is the biggest thing for us because if we're, all of our identity is tied up with our classroom and our online learning courses, then we are going to be very nervous about our job. Instead, perhaps we need to look at it as an opportunity to try out new ways of building capability and confidence. And why not start with it with ourselves rather than your with our organisation? Let's experience it for ourselves.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. And I think we'll wrap up fairly soon. Without wanting to diminish the devastating impact that COVID-19 is having both from health and economic perspectives and so on around the globe right now, it's clear that there are some ways in which this could represent an opportunity for the learning profession, both in the near term and the longer term. And you've spoken about some of that, Laura, Don, what do you see as some of the key opportunities that this presents for us as a profession, particularly if we do come together and learn from each other and support each other through this period.

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Donald H Taylor:

Importantly, we do work together and support each other. And I would echo Laura's point there about needing to be competent, to be seen to be competent, and to be positive and to lead from the front and to be examples of what good remote learning practices like. Having said that, I think that the opportunity is clear in that as Laura alluded to, this is a moment when the business finally is open to the idea of change in learning. Until now, it's been something that's just been done the same way it's always been done. Suddenly, there's a possibility of change that requires people in L&D to be far less cautious, far bolder, and far more comfortable with ambiguity than we typically are. And so you know what, I don't know if this is the right way of doing it. I don't know quite what the results will be. I may well end up doing the job at a 60% job here. But I have no choice. I'm going to get on with it and do it and deliver for my business and my people. And actually right now, I think that's what people are trying out for. So let's go and do it. And change the position of Learning and Development in people's minds from being some sort of fulfilment function that takes place in the basement to being a leadership part of the organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

So any final tips that you'd like to leave with people in the learning profession right now, Don, in the midst of their response,

Donald H Taylor:

Yes, there are lots of resources that are out there right now. Not all of them are good. Some of them are. And I'll be doing a podcast probably Thursday. Look, we want people listening to the podcast on this podcast. I'll be doing more work. Laura will be doing more work. Lots of people will be doing more work on. And you can find out about it on LinkedIn and Twitter. So the one thing I would do is get online and stay connected with people and take time, every day, to do it as things change, to develop your understanding of what's happening and also your own capabilities in this field. It doesn't take much to make this shift and it starts with the attitude shift that I was talking about. Be positive, be comfortable with ambiguity.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you, Don. Laura, would you like to add any final tips or suggestions to people right now?

Laura Overton:

Well, obviously I agree with everything that Don said. Naturally, because it is an opportunity for us to be able to change but it's not about jumping off into the unknown. The tip that I would give to you is that as an industry, we have been talking about responding better to the world of work, being aligned to business being outcome driven first, this gives us an opportunity to do that. We have a ream of evidence in our industry, of people who have already tried out this and been successful. So you are not alone. You are not experimenting. In an unknown world. You're not hacking through a jungle to create a path. There are others who have already taken that path, learn from them, and enjoy the journey, if you can, amongst all this uncertainty, enjoy the freedom of being able to try something that others have also made a success of.

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Michelle Ockers:

Thank you, Laura. And thank you Don for kicking off the series.

For listeners our next episode in the series will be with Jo Cook and Shannon Tipton, where we talk about moving to live online virtual learning

About Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers works with business and learning leaders to realise the untapped potential of learning in organisations. She is an organisational learning strategist and modern workplace learning practitioner. Michelle works with organisations to develop and implement transformative organisational learning strategy, and to build the capability of their learning team. She delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events. Michelle also mentors learning professionals at all career stages on career planning and professional development.

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

- *Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of Learning and Development*
- *Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*

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