

Learning Uncut Disruption Series
Nick Shackleton-Jones – Emotions and Learning Design -
What Really Matters
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to our next edition in the Learning Uncut Disruption series, bringing you practical guidance and tips from experts around the world on things you can do as a learning professional as part of your immediate response to helping people through the current period of crisis and rearrangement.

Michelle Ockers:

My guest today is Nick Shackleton-Jones. Welcome, Nick. Could you introduce yourself to our guests, please? Our listeners, sorry.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

Yes. Hi, everybody. I'm Nick Shackleton-Jones. I've had many lives. I started out as a psychology lecturer many years ago, worked for the BBC in the UK, worked for BP, worked for a big consultancy, and I'm currently UK learning director for Deloitte.

Michelle Ockers:

Thanks, Nick. And you have done a lot of thinking about learning and about how learning really happens. One of the areas I know you've put a lot of time and thought and research into is the role of emotions in learning, which is where we're going to focus today. What is the role of emotions in learning?

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

Good question. Yes, as you say. I like the use of the word really there, how learning really happens. So I published a book last year called How People Learn, which I believe introduces the first general theory of learning. This has come out of years of looking at different learning theories and not really finding them very satisfactory or applicable.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

What that theory says at heart is that you don't remember anything. All you actually remember is your reactions to what happens to you, and you encode your reactions to things. Then you use that to reconstruct what's going on. That means that if you and I have the same experience because you, Michelle, and I react differently to things, you may be a big fan of architecture, I might be a big fan of plants, we can be on the same train journey, but we remember different things, because you had a different reaction.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

There's a lot of face validity to this. People listening to this, if you think back over your lives, it will be the things that people had a big reaction to that they remember, and which drive their learning. So it's not just that emotion is important to learning, emotion is the only process behind learning. You are only encoding what you react to.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

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So right now, the case in point, one of the cases in point, I'm pretty sure plenty of people will remember this for a long time to come. It's causing a lot of strong emotions in people. What they're remembering is a lot of stuff that they didn't have a reaction to previously.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

As an example, lots of people are suddenly learning huge amounts about coronavirus. It's made up of proteins and grease and RNA, that they're learning about epidemiology and kind of transfer rates and different strategies. That's because all of a sudden this has become really important to people. They have a reaction to it, and they encode the information.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. You have coined a term, affective context model, for this whole theory of how emotions drive learning. I'll put a link to the show notes to a great little video with some beautiful drawing from yourself on the internet that people can watch to get their heads around this affective context model. So under normal circumstances, what are the implications of this for the work of learning professionals?

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

So I'd like to differentiate education and learning. Learning is a natural process that we've been doing for thousands if not millions of years. Education is a weird set of rituals that we've kind of arrived at in the last few hundred years, don't really bear a lot of relation to learning in its natural state. In fact, they can actually be quite negative.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

A lot of education is what I would call anxiety-based learning, which means well in the early days the anxiety was that somebody who was going to physically beat you with a stick. Then when we decided that wasn't a great idea, we found new ways to make people anxious like tests. The problem with that is anxiety is an emotion which then drives some encoding information for the test. But what happens as soon as you pass the test? You forget it all. The other problem is that whenever somebody says, "Oh, you need some learning right now," everybody feels anxious. We see this in our businesses as well.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

So we should start doing learning and kind of move away from education. The starting point for any kind of learning that we do is really understanding what matters to the person. I guess many of us know this, and we will be doing it for years actually. What do people care about? Because that's what's going to drive their learning. And that has a whole host of practical implications, so a series of processes that me and my teams have been using for decades now, that can make a big difference.

Michelle Ockers:

So the idea of what matters to the person, let's talk about that for a moment. Because of course, the classic work of andragogy talks about adult learning and relevance. Is this idea of what matters to the person any different from the idea of relevance as presented in the theory around andragogy?

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

Yes, because what matters is often ... it is emotional. It's affected by nature, and it's deeper than that. I'll give you a sort of practical example. If you've got children, I've got children, and

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it's their first day at school, you might have a sort of performance consulting or an andragogical view on what's relevant to somebody. It might be relevant to know that you need to know your teachers, where your classes are. But what really drives people's learning, what drives my daughter's learning, she's on TikTok all day long, is, "What's cool? How do I fit in?" because that's what really profoundly matters to people.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

In case that sounds like a trivial example, I've done a lot of work with induction programs. What really matters to people when they join an organization is how to fit in. So they will consume information like [inaudible 00:05:50].

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

One of the most popular things we ever produced is Top 10 Mistakes Not to Make. And you can produce a simple one pager, Top 10 Mistakes to Avoid Making, and people will consume that like nobody's business. Why? Well, you know why. Because that's what matters to people. They don't want to screw up. They want to look good.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. In terms of what matters to someone, the people whose learning we're there to support, real learning, how do we know that? How do we figure that out?

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

Brilliant question. We talk to them, and that's an incredible and revolutionary and radical idea, and almost nobody in learning and education is doing it. In education specifically, you just have a curriculum, right? A bunch of kids turn up in your class. You don't really care what they care about. You may not even know their names. You're just going to blast them with all the content. That's absolutely the worst thing that we can do, and I've seen a lot of it in L&D, adopting that educational model where we just say, "Here's the PowerPoint. You're all going to sit still, listen to this stuff. We'll have a test at the end."

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

The right way to go about learning design is to actually start ... well, we can call it user-centered design if you'd prefer, but actually take the time to understand what tasks are people doing, the kind of process that Cathy Moore is doing great in the US. But also, I would add to that, what do they really care about? What are their top 20 concerns?

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

If somebody says to you, they've done a learning needs analysis, I would say to them, "Okay, what are your audience's top 20 tasks? What are their top 20 concerns?" And if they don't know the answer to that question, they haven't done the right analysis. So our starting point should not be a curriculum. It should not be a list of topics. It should be what really matters to this audience or even to this individual, and then what's going to be the appropriate resource or experience that we should deliver for them?

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. This might seem like an obvious question, but I do want to check in on this. Would it be fair to say that people would be in a heightened state of anxiety, potentially fear with just the shifts we've had to make really quickly in the world of work in response to the COVID-19 outbreak?

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Nick Shackleton-Jones:

Absolutely, and it's a good prompt, because right now I'm knee-deep in lots of conversations about what are we going to do with our learning. I think the bad kind of conversation is, "How are we going to take all the stuff that you were doing before and do it online?" That's not a great starting point.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

A better conversation is, "What do people really care about right now? If we don't know the answer to that, how do we find out?" So probably they care about, "How do I use all these different bits of technology?" Probably they're going to start to feel quite lonely and isolated as they start to work from home more. Probably they're worried about juggling childcare and other responsibilities. If we can create simple practical resources, resources not courses was a mantra I introduced a while back, resources that will help them with the things that they care about, they will thank us.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

The other thing I would say, just a piece of practical advice, is coaching conversations. Coaching has been consistently, I guess it's the same for you Michelle, popular throughout the entirety of my career. Why? Because you've got somebody on the other end of the line. He's not just battering you with content, but actually cares about you and your problems, is going to talk to you about them. So coaching conversations would be a great starting point.

Michelle Ockers:

What's the role of social learning or peer-to-peer learning right now? Is that more important than ever because of the enforced physical isolation that many people are having to go through?

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

I think so. I worked with many organizations, including organizations like the Red Cross and the United Nations. When we talk to leaders who are being literally shot at on a daily basis, they are not going to be dipping in and out of the [ALMS 00:09:41] and completing early learning modules. We set up WhatsApp groups, because often who they want to hear from are fellow problem solvers, people in a similar situation facing similar challenges. They're quite happy if you can set up and facilitate social groups to learn from each other and to share what they're doing.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So what if anything should learning professionals be doing differently right now and into the foreseeable future from what you think they typically usually do?

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

Well, I guess we always obsess a little bit over technology. But now I think I would say, is to avoid falling into the pitfall of just thinking, "What if we put all our courses online? And let's just set up loads of Skype meetings or whatever and use the same pathway [inaudible 00:10:29]." Now is the time to actually pause and be user-centered. Really kind of focus in on right now what would be most helpful for people, because that's what's driving their learning right now, all of the anxieties, all of the problems that they're facing. How can we catalogue those, and how can we provide resources or experiences that are actually going to help them with the challenges that they're facing right now?

Michelle Ockers:



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So is there anything else you would suggest to people, to learning professionals, right now that they should not be doing?

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

Content dumping is never a good thing to do, especially not right now. So just kind of pushing more and more of this, the kind of the standard content they have out there using different channels. I think that's just kind of education, it's not learning. So I think we should avoid that.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. Is there anything else you'd like to share that I haven't asked you about? I know you have a wealth of experience and practical ideas on other topics as well. We'd started talking about emotions and the role of emotions in learning. Is there anything you'd like to elaborate in that area or any other topics that you think are really pertinent right now that you'd like to take the opportunity to talk about?

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

I think we've covered the most important things. All of the stuff that I've talked about, it sounds like self-promotion. It really isn't. I'm just big on ideas and sharing ideas. All of the stuff that I talked about is public domain. I've put together a process, 5Di, which is user-centered design process, I think one of only a couple of user-centered design processes. That's all out there as well. There's stuff about how to run focus groups. I probably also published a bunch of stuff on good ways to use technology as well. But of course, there's lots of that out there. I think there's almost too much at the moment. As I say, I would look for a content which is around user-centered design and uses of technology, which are going to really help people rather than kind of [inaudible 00:12:31].

Michelle Ockers:

Excellent. Thank you, Nick. We'll put a link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes, plus some of those other resources that you've mentioned, because I know people want to dig a little bit further. Really appreciate you taking time to talk about this important topic today. Thank you.

Nick Shackleton-Jones:

Thanks, Michelle. Good luck, everyone.

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.

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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*

Michelle can be contacted at michelle@michelleockers.com.