

Learning Uncut Disruption Series
Mark Britz – Social Learning at Work - A Quick Start Guide
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut, bringing you practical guidance and tips from leading practitioners on things you are probably scaling up or even starting to do for the first time. Right now. Today's guest is Mark Britz and we're going to talk about social learning. Mark, welcome to the podcast and please introduce yourself.

Mark Britz:

Hey, thanks, Michelle. It's exciting to be here and chat with you today. My background is you know, I was a former educator and I've worked in L&D space for about 20 years. I've run the gamut of formal and informal and social. I really kind of jumped into the social space back in 2008 when people were just coming to it. I said I had the luxury of experimenting. My organisations allowed that, it gives me gave me a leg up. So I really got to delve deep into social technology in particular and how that was used inside organisations and that really kind of fuelled my understanding of how people truly are learning in the workspace that they're in. And I've taken that, you know, to every organisation I've been with since. I'm the Senior Manager of Programming at the eLearning Guild. We put on great informal as well as formal learning events for learning professionals. And I keep my finger on the pulse of social learning.

Michelle Ockers:

You were one of the first people I connected with on Twitter when I started actively using it in 2012. So much of what I learned from social learning in those early days was certainly learned from you. And I continue to appreciate and enjoy your blog Mark, so we'll link to that in the show notes. Thank you for the part you played in my own development in this space.

Mark Britz:

That's awesome.

Michelle Ockers:

So let's talk about social learning. What is social learning at work?

Mark Britz:

Yeah, I love the fact that you just said at work because I think it changed the context, right? So we know social learning. We know the history of it. We know Bandura, we know the rest. And the bottom line is we've always been social learning. It's happening constantly. But in a work environment, you know, what we're trying to get down to is these much more purposeful conversations that can happen between people in the workspace that revolve around the work itself, the sharing, the collaborating, the communication, that takes place to inform people's practices, frankly.

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Michelle Ockers:

And why is that important? You know, we've got courses. Doesn't that do the job?

Mark Britz:

Yeah, I think the courses are important. I'll never, you know, you and I both have a strong background in 702010 - and thanks to Charles Jennings and all the work he's done over the years. But it is, you know, that smaller percentage of what people are learning - because what social does is allows, it's that continual process of learning. We were conscious of it all the time in the workplace. And though formal learning has its place, social learning wraps itself quite nicely around all that to help people build context and spread that information and get feedback back to L&D, which is extremely important.

Michelle Ockers:

I like the word purposeful in your definition when you describe what social learning at work is. You have some principles that you put together in a Quick Start Guide, which we'll link in the show notes, that people can purposefully use to improve social learning and get started with social learning at work. Let's talk through the four principles - what they are, and some practical examples of how to purposely go about applying those. The first one Mark is 'Practice Transparency and Openness.' Talk to us a little bit about that.

Mark Britz:

Yeah, I mean, those are pretty lofty terms. But I think it's the core, you know, I really do. I think it starts with transparency and openness. And what we mean by that is, when we say something's transparent, that means we're kind of letting people see what's happening. You know, we're allowing them to look at the how the sausage is made, as they used to say, right, so to see how it's done. Whereas openness is much more about an invitation to kind of get involved to have that particular collaborative opportunity to have input and to allow people to give feedback. So at the highest level, I think these two things set the tone in an organisation to be able to continue to have, like I said, those purposeful conversations around work. People want to talk about work, you know, they want to be involved. They want to have input in there. And sometimes we prevent that unconsciously in our organisations. And I think the key thing is to open things up so that people can see what you're doing. You can model that behaviour yourself. A lot of people will do that - a grassroots effort. And then of course, from the very top is to open up why we do things the way we do them so people can kind of look closer at the particular processes and protocols that are in place so we can continue to evolve them in organisations.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm going to approach this question from the opposite direction. What gets in the way of that openness - like what barriers are that we might have to break down to create greater transparency and openness?

Mark Britz:

That's a great question. I think that's the biggest job of L&D is, is breaking down barriers between people and other people, people and information and granting that access. I think the biggest barrier that's still out there is tradition. I think we've been doing the same thing for generations in the workplace, at least until the last half century. That has really kind of solidified of what we see as siloed hierarchical decision making, and we exclude people

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rather than include them. We put people in a pecking order in organisations unconsciously. And that is a hard thing to break through. We see it when we offer people opportunities to stretch in their jobs, so we can explore some other skills and their opportunities. But I think that is the barrier that we face mostly is, is a lot of people, a lot of companies look at things and they say, "well, we're progressing. We're making money. We're increasing sales and revenue. If it's not broke, why fix it?"

And so this is a problem we face I think, as we look at the current situation in the world now is, everything's getting turned on its head. And so now is a chance to truly explore what we can do. And one of the biggest reasons why James, and I put this out there is to kind of challenge a little bit of what we're doing and bring this forward more.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a period of great unfreezing, right. And I guess the question here is, given that that sort of traditional siloed structures and ways of entrenched ways of decision making have gotten in the way of improving social learning at work in the past, what suggestions do you have for learning professionals to help the organisation to break those down?

Mark Britz:

I think it always it always starts with about two things. One, it starts with your own personal practices and making those visible. I think anybody has to model and encourage. I mean, Jane Hart's been saying this for years. One of the biggest things you do is social learning, right, is model it, let people see it. And then I would also take it to the point of recognising when you see it in your organisation, by anybody in your organisation and amplify the heck out of it. You know, as soon as you see somebody doing what is right in terms of sharing and that openness and transparency of what they're doing and why and the humility that comes with it, you've got to applaud them, you've got to bring that forward and share why that's valuable. With that context around. I think it just definitely creates that opening for more people to do it.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. And we're going to talk in the next episode with Jane Bozarth about showing your work so people get a better idea of how to go about that and how to support others to do that. Shall we move on to 'Reward and Recognise' and why that's important.

Mark Britz:

I think it's a big one. I think systematically we tend to in organisations to recognise and reward individual achievement and we tend to recognise and reward outputs. And those two things hold us back. Because really what's happening is the recognition that most work is done in groups. It's a lot of input from other people and the valuable input. And I think management is a key artery when it comes to social in organisations. Because if management did a better job of necessarily recognising and rewarding those collaborative behaviours, the inputs and recognising the inputs that go into whatever is being created, or the process or project that's being done, it changes the mindset and what's of value inside of an organisation. So we've got to kind of again flip what we look at is how we how we reward and recognise people in our organisation. It's not just individual contributors, but that team aspect and putting forward the fact that we're all putting information into the system, and being able to see that and recognise it. I think then what we start to do is, other people start to see that this is what is valued and rather than try to achieve on their own. They'll pull people closer.

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Michelle Ockers:

And how can learning professionals contribute to that?

Mark Britz:

Yeah, I think it's I think what learning professionals do because they have the access to the SMEs ...

Michelle Ockers:

Subject Matter experts, right?

Mark Britz:

Thank you. Yep. The Subject Matter Experts in the organisation. And because they're close to work processes, because they know that what they're working to fix oftentimes there's problems in the processes - to bring forward better training might be or resources or aids. Because they have their finger on the pulse of those they can start to recognise who in the system is contributing and share that information. I think L&D is in a great spot to be able to disseminate quickly through the organisation who's doing what and of value in the organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

Let's talk about the third principle then. And this is in relation to 'Curation over Creation.' We have had one episode in the Disruption series where we talked about curation. So let's add to that with your take on what curation is and the importance of it and how to do it well.

Mark Britz:

Yeah, I think the importance of it is easy to define. We know that there's a lot of content already out there. And it's probably most important that we are able to harvest, to aggregate that information for our people inside. So inside information as well as outside. We do it all the time. We're doing it unconsciously, most people don't have a system around it. But L&D I think is rightfully positioned in their research and helping find information, to be able to pull this information together. I think what gets lost with curation though, is a lot of people don't tie in the social piece to this, and that is adding that valuable context around the resources and the information they share. You know, we see it all the time. If you look, you know, on Twitter, you're more apt to engage with content - or I let's put it this way, I'd be more apt to engage with content that you personally told me why it's of value to you how, you use them. information. If people are just thrusting out links without that in there it's a little bit sketchy. They want that personal connection to that content. And that's something that has to be taught as part of the system. But I think what we're doing is when L&D gets so focused on building a course, a training, a programme of that nature, and they're not looking at what's happening and how people truly gather information and use it, and use that themselves, they're missing a huge opportunity to bring learning into the organisation in ways that meet people's needs in the flow of their work. So, you know, again, I think there's a social aspect of curation, as I said, because it ties the person to that content that brings in a lot more value to people.

Michelle Ockers:

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And are you an advocate of encouraging people right across the organisation to curate rather than just the learning professionals themselves doing the curation? And if so, how can you help people to get started with curation practice from other areas of the business?

Mark Britz:

I think one thing is that we know that marketing engages in a lot of curation activities in what they do. So they've already got some expertise in what they're doing. We should be able to tap into those silos a little bit better. I definitely don't think it's an L&D only. I think L&D's biggest value might be to help people understand how to do it. I love what Harold Jarche does with seek sense and his approach there.

Michelle Ockers:

Seek-Sense-Share approach.

Mark Britz:

Thank you. Seek, sense and share. I just kind of slipped over that one. Yeah, because it's a really simple model. It's very personal - Personal Knowledge Mastery or management that he uses. And I think the when people can understand this themselves they become much more valuable to other people around them. So I think if L&D position them ... in a sense, it's like helping people how to learn but it's really helping people how to source information, how to make sense of that information and get it to the right people. And that's definitely an organisation wide skill that L&D can help with, but they don't necessarily have to own the process of curation. They really just want to help people understand what to do.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. How can they help people to understand? Do we need a course on curation Mark? Or is there some other way they can go about getting people up and started with curation?

Mark Britz:

Yeah, like I mentioned with Harold, it's great stuff. And it's not rocket science. But I think the biggest thing is it goes back to again saying we need a model these behaviours, and we need to encourage people to do it. When I say encourage it goes back to the other point of when we see people doing it, is to bring that to life, amplify it, you know, point people out in the organisation are doing it, well not just do it yourself. And that helps to kind of move that forward a lot quicker, but it's definitely not something that we have to build a course around. We can just start to model that.

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Michelle Ockers:

It's one of those things I sometimes talk about the kind of frontline soldier approach, you know, getting into the trenches with people and just showing them how to do some things. And I think this is one of those where just a little bit of practical guidance and support to people that you know, are gathering resources on how to do that more effectively and share that can go a long way - particularly as you talked about Subject Matter Experts before, they're probably good people to target to get some curation happening out in the business.

Mark Britz:

Absolutely. excellent example.

Michelle Ockers:

So formalising social technology tools, and platforms, of course, are part of the picture here, especially in today's environment. What sort of tools and platforms are needed? and What tips do you have for people with harnessing platforms and technology for social learning?

Mark Britz:

One of the things I'll always say is all these tools that are available - if you look at its Slack, or you look at Teams, you look at Yammer and you look at Workplace - and the list goes on and on of various tools. They all do the same thing. They really do. I'm not going to sit there and tell you anything different about the features and functions. They're all about community, collaboration and sharing. Those three elements are present in them. The problem for a lot of organisations is they have no particular strategy around their use, because they're almost omnipresent. We see it now with Office 365. And having Yammer and having Teams in it. They're just part of that package for a lot of people. And so what happens is people ad hoc. They jump into it, they start using it, which is wonderful, but doesn't scale very fast when we don't have anything around it. So again, I think L&D plays a significant role. I know back in the day when Yammer was free, and we had it back in, I think 2008. At one of the companies I was with, I really started to use it right with L&D as a place for us to build a real central knowledge of it so we could share and use the tool itself beyond us after we had a core understanding of it. So what I mean by formalising social technology is, like I said, I think too many companies are like, "Oh, we have teams or we have Yammer, we're social," but they're missing the greater part of how do we use these tools to solve problems in the organisation? How do we use this to bring people together? How do we solve problems with this technology? So we can have these expansive conversations throughout the organisation. And that conversation I still think is very light in most organisations and has to be central.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. I think having some sort of facilitation approach, community facilitation plan, even if it's just light, and being deliberate about how you support people to connect and collaborate on your social technology is a good practice.

Mark Britz:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

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And I noticed when you look at a lot of professional associations for learning professionals are updating their capability maps, and increasingly we're seeing these kinds of skills being formally recognised as part of the skill set for learning teams.

Mark Britz:

Absolutely. How you build a network and importance of constantly, you know, navigating through your network and pruning that network is a critical task today.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay, so we've been through the principles and some ways you can practice those from your Quick Start Guide, which will be in the show notes. Are there any big call outs - either absolutely don't do the following or absolutely do the following - that you'd like to highlight as we get close to the end of this discussion?

Mark Britz:

Yeah, I think I think one of the big misses for a lot of people when it comes to social learning at work is they typically will think about it as a technology issue. As soon as social as mentioned, social media comes to mind and they look at the tools they have. I would make the case that the first place to be looking is the work and understanding how people work, who they work with what their work processes are, is to step away and have those conversations with people how things get done. You know, James Tyer, my co-author on the book Social by Design, when he was with Kellogg, he had, like 1000 conversations before he did anything for what he was hired to do. And that was to really propel Yammer forward. And people looked at him like what are you doing and he's going around the company and he's like, I have to understand, you know what people are doing now. You have start from where people are at. So that would be my one big like, you got to do this. And what you don't got to do is go back and just start with the technology, which is a huge mistake.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, this is coming through is such a strong theme, both with the disruption series, and I had Charles Jennings and Vivian Heijnen talking about supporting learning in the workplace. And that was sort of a big part of that is you got to get out into the workplace, you got to understand how work is done. But also in the regular Learning Uncut series, which is case studies. You know, we had Trish Uhl recently and Rachel Horowitz from Mars talking about Going to the Gemba - by getting out into the actual workplace to understand how work is done.

Mark Britz:

I can't disagree now.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, so great tip. Thank you, Mark. So for anyone listening to this episode, who wants to learn more about social learning and do more with it -w here should they go next?

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Mark Britz:

Well, besides my blog, which will be in the notes, I would recommend you know, some of the biggest names that that really propelled me and I always praise the work that they've done over the years. Because what they did is kind of for me was they gave me the ideas that I could put into practice and work and learn through what I was learning and change the way I think about learning and work and what needs to be done. Some of those people I would recommend are Charles Jennings, which you've mentioned, Harold Jarche, which I've mentioned. Jane Hart is another and her modern workplace learning. Clark Quinn was also a great influence for me. Euan Semple e in the UK. So a lot of names I'm putting out there. And the reason I say names over books, is because they're constantly evolving their thought, you know, in terms of the current context of the changes. So, I've always been an advocate for what they're doing and bringing forward and, you know, like I said in the past, I put a lot of what they were talking about into practice and saw some amazing results.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. And there'll be links to find all of those people in the show notes. Thank you so much for your time today, Mark, and for all of that great practical guidance for people to getting started with social learning at work.

Mark Britz:

Thank you, Michelle. It's great to be here.

\\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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