

Learning Uncut Disruption Series
Arun Pradhan – Learning Journeys in A Virtual Environment
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to the penultimate episode in the Learning Uncut Disruption series, providing practical guidance and tips to learning practitioners who are scaling up or getting started with new approaches for the first time. We're going to bookend the series today with a session from Arun Pradhan talking about blended learning journeys and, in particular, how we can structure really good quality blended learning journeys in the virtual world.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome Arun.

Arun Pradhan:

Hi, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

Arun, can you briefly introduce yourself and then we'll get into the conversation?

Arun Pradhan:

Yes. People probably best just to check out my website if you're interested in what I do. But, essentially, I'm involved in learning performance and innovation, and I play kind of different roles in that sort of space.

Michelle Ockers:

Arun, I was prompted to have this conversation with you after seeing a recent post on LinkedIn where you shared a graphic you created on blended learning journeys. I think you created it a while ago, but you're reposting it to get the message out that you can still do blended learning journeys in a fully virtual way. What is a blended learning journey?

Arun Pradhan:

It's interesting when most people talk about blended learning and, traditionally blended learning, it's always been about mixing between face-to-face and digital. That's not the primary kind of mix that I've used in the past and, particularly now, I thought it was worthwhile stating that up front like the two things. There's a few things I tried to mix but the one of the things that I try to mix is asynchronous and synchronous. If you look at that, it's kind of like the asynchronous is the sort of individual investigation of someone actually learning by themselves and synchronous is the opportunity to do something collaboratively with others. If you use that as a definition that well might be face-to-face, but it can also be digital.

Arun Pradhan:

The other thing I like to consider how I'm blending is the balance between... ultimately, I see blends as supporting and nudging the way we work. If you think someone's workflow even our own workflow, a blended program is really a way of providing some scaffolding over that workflow and just nudging it slightly to move it. By the end of that, the behaviours change. We're adopting different processes, the mindsets have shifted, but it's really about embracing the actual work rather than the traditional kind of learning, which has been an

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event-based thing that happens in isolation and then it's up to the person to try to bring that back into reality when they come back to their jobs.

Michelle Ockers:

As your description suggests and the name implies, a blended learning journey will take place over a period of time. In your graphic, which will obviously include with the show notes, you describe a structure or scaffolding of the blended learning journey. Can you describe that for us?

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah, absolutely. I should say I've used this diagram or a version of this diagram for a long time and there's two diagrams I sort of balance between when I'm doing a job, when I'm working on a job. One is learning in a performance ecosystem, it's called, and people can look that one up too. Maybe you can include that in your show notes. That's for a more mature situation, which is like how you design for business as usual. That includes how you organize for people to connect with other people to actually have stretch experiences and interesting experiences and actually access resources that they require on the job. So that's the design for just work as BAU.

Arun Pradhan:

This blended learning journey is really my version of a course, if you actually believe that a course needs to happen, and I think that's a big assumption to start with. But if a course does need to happen, for me, I always go to this. Even if it's low budget, even if it's quite small, I go to this blended learning journey. I don't always hit all the steps. It depends. But just very quickly, the top-level stages or the framework, if you like, is firstly to engage, and I'll do it really simplified here. It's to engage and that's really about the wisdom, that what-in-it-for-me, like getting people hooked in terms of what are they going to get out of it and get them interested with curiosity.

Arun Pradhan:

Priming is in the next phase, and that's an important one particularly with the rise of behavioural economics. We've seen how important anchoring and just priming people for experiences. If you put something that first instance, how that will... like there's the example of how old is Gandhi. If you ask people today if Gandhi is like... I can't remember the exact study they did, but it was around to 40 to 60 years old, you'll get one thing. But if you say, it's like 70 to 80 years old, you'll get another answer. That priming, the way you actually set up people for an experience is actually quite crucial.

Arun Pradhan:

If you look at the diagram, there's an orange section in the middle and that's all about the work because that first bit, that engage in prime, it is kind of external to the work but, in the middle of it all, is how you apply it and how you support people to connect in their work. In that application piece, it's all about how you give them those stretch projects, access to resources. It might be these email or other nudges that you support them with, reminders.

Arun Pradhan:

Then connect is all about how you allow them to connect with other people to work more effectively, whether it be through social networks, through more effective teams, through retros, through, I don't know, shadowing or mentoring or anything. That's the crucial bit is that on the job piece. But then after that, I've found it's really important to have a moment where you get out of the work and have a moment of reflection. That moment of reflection could be both self-driven but also, if there's less motivation there, it could also be an

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accountability piece where you're actually reporting what you've done differently to some executive group or some project team or whatever.

Arun Pradhan:

There's some sense of you've got the first bit of scaffolding, which prepares you for the work. You get into the work; you're doing that differently. You're accessing things, you're trying to shift your behaviour, and you're doing that collectively by connecting with other people in a different kind of way but then there's this accountability piece at the end of that. Whatever that accountability piece is, whether it's to yourself or... usually, I design it with some form accountability to either peers or an executive group, there's that piece at the end. It's like a defined kind of period. Finally is the embed piece where you're looking at, yes, that was a great kind of sprint through this period of changing a work, but now how can you actually make this sustainable, what didn't work, what worked in allowing you to actually continue with this change. That's it in a nutshell. Just engage prime before the work, then apply and connect in the work. Then after that, sort of change work experience, reflect and embed.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a great framework and a great structure, Arun, for getting people to think more comprehensively about workflow learning and supporting behaviour change across a period of time. Your infographic or your graphic also includes a whole stack of examples at each stage of what activities or resources you might create, what experiences you might set up for people to have at each of those stages. We just don't have time to go through all of them, but I would encourage people to take a good moment. It will prompt your thinking for sure. I know you created this graphic around the blended learning journey some time ago, but why did you feel there was a need to repost that and share that again right now?

Arun Pradhan:

Well, it was, honestly, on my to-do list anyway because I see these conversations about changing facilitated sessions into virtual sessions. I just have a sinking feeling that people are just going to literally put a session on Zoom and call it like, "Yeah, we've gone digital." I think it takes a bit of rethinking.

Arun Pradhan:

Also, I was just working with one of the clients I was working with, which we... he's overseas, but I just do these hour calls with him every couple of months, although it's been sped up recently, and just talking to him about his challenges. He knew about this framework, I think, but maybe hadn't seen it as a possible thing that he could use in a virtual context. It was something I kind of took for granted, but I realized that it was something that was probably missing from a lot of people's work or some people's work. A lot of people have got other sorts of frameworks that they use for blended experiences, and I'm not saying this is the only one, but it was certainly a gap with people who were just focusing on how to digitize rather than how to provide experiences. I think that was the thing that was lost. People who organize face-to-face events, they're often thinking through experiences and, somehow, that gets lost when they go digital, and you still got to think about that overarching experience.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. Are there any traps or errors for people who genuinely are trying to get started with creating learning journeys as opposed to learning events? Any callouts, things you'd encourage them to watch out for and avoid doing?

Arun Pradhan:



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Yeah, there's a few. I'd say firstly don't get obsessed with content. You've probably heard me say before, don't make eye contact with the content until you're ready for that. It's all about the performance problem that you're trying to solve, the behaviours that you're trying to shift. Focus on those, and then use that prism to ask is this content going to help? One of the biggest traps I see with learning designers is that we tend to be very controlling people. We tend to think that if we have the right content, the world will be a better place. That's our way of controlling the world, and that's not the way the world works, or people work. I had limit content and really target content, so it's incredibly valuable and provided to those people at the right time so that it actually becomes more memorable and impactful. Firstly, don't overdo content. Think of it really strategically. It can be powerful, but less is more usually in the context of content.

Arun Pradhan:

Some of the other traps I would say... I've talked about that reflect phase. I've been doing blends like this for quite a long time, and maybe seven, eight years ago when I was still working at Deacon, when I was doing some, I tended not to have that reflect stage at the end, an accountability piece. I'd kind of just focus on setting it up, then work, get them to work through the workflow and then trail off. What I found is that people would just get too smashed by work and their reality of their existence and they would just let it slip. Whereas when you had that point in time, often it was a two-month kind of marker, knowing that you've got to come to that workshop and whether you're discussing it with peers or whether you're reporting it to a manager or your capturing your lessons to share for the next cohort or whatever it is, whatever that accountability piece is, it just framed the why people engaged with their work before that time.

Arun Pradhan:

I would suggest what thing are you going to put two months from here so people have got that in the back of their head and it frames the way they are actually... they tend to have more metacognition when they know they're going to do this thing later because they're thinking about what's actually happening more so it forces reflection more. That's a big tip.

Arun Pradhan:

Sorry Michelle, you were going to say something?

Michelle Ockers:

I was going to that's a great tip and accountability and being quite deliberate rather than just saying, "Well, what are you going to do?" and then leaving people to it without following up. I think that's a real trap that we sometimes fall into.

Arun Pradhan:

Absolutely. There was a few years ago when I was totally obsessed with user-generated content. I've sort of gone off that a bit now. I still use it but it wasn't this sort of be-all and end-all of everything. But I did experiment including, at this two months' mark time, you create a video which then gets used for the next cohort as part of their priming section, and that did work well in some instances. I would say it didn't work well in others. But, yeah, that's an example. It doesn't always have to be to a manager. Sometimes it can be to their peers is, I guess, the point. The last big pitfall, I would say, is, like any model, I've broken this up to be more understandable so you can use it more effectively, so I can use it more effectively. By breaking it up, you sort of lose the complexity. In reality, these things overlap. In reality, some of them will slide a bit to the background, whereas others will come to the fore.

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Arun Pradhan:

One of the key things I would suggest is thinking about the experience rather than just taking off the stages. For me, I reference my performance design approach, that canvas I use and so on, to actually understand the use of personas and even using journey maps to actually think about what the experience of someone going through this would be and different groups, different key segments, if you like, or personas I should say going through this and what that looks like. You're thinking of the interlocking moments between these different elements as well. That's kind of crucial rather than just ticking off the stages.

Michelle Ockers:

So start with learner experience; always a good place to start. Actually, I'm going to pull myself up there on that one because I think the word "learner," the label "learner" leads us to flip ourselves back into that controlling mindset. Worker or just that the customer or the user experience is probably a better frame. What language do you use around that, Arun?

Arun Pradhan:

Most of my clients, when I work with L&D, they'll talk about learners. But when I work directly with a business, they'll just talk about their staff or employees. I just use the term that they're using. I prefer not to use learner. Even I tend to talk about courses so much. As you know, I talk about opportunities for investigation because, for me, if you think about what a course is, it's like a structured process of investigation and they might be better off... I do think that asynchronous moments of learning are quite crucial, but for sometimes that can be better supported through just providing the right resources that someone can investigate through.

Arun Pradhan:

In some cases, I've cured a course just by providing an article. It's not even a video. It's just an article, and that's enough. Someone can get that information when they need it. It's just thinking from rather than the course framework. It's thinking of, in this moment, are we trying to help this person collaborate and connect, and learn from other people? Are we trying to help them to have really interesting experiences and have some scaffolding so they can reflect and get feedback on what they've done or are we trying to support them to investigate? If we're trying to support them to investigate a traditional course might be the answer or any learning thing or something, but it also might be just providing them with the right resources at the right moment.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. You and I talked briefly before this discussion around tools and technology. I know we're trying to encourage people not to start with the tech, but to start with people, performance and experiences. But there was one particular area where you wanted to talk a little bit about the technology, which people are probably using more than usual right now. That's in connect in your framework, which is around the use of social networking technologies to support that. What use do you see those kinds of technologies being put to or how do you think people should be using them, and what tips do you have for learning professionals who are wanting to more effectively utilize social networking technologies in that connect stage of the learning journey?

Arun Pradhan:

My general principle with tech is to leverage what's there because I find that most organizations have underestimated or underused what they've actually bought or bought licenses for. Whatever software you've got, like even if it's an LMS or knowledge management system or you've got confluence or whatever it is, it's probably going to be able to do more than you expect.

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Arun Pradhan:

I was talking to someone from Atlassian, and they use Trello in their organization because that's a product for Atlassian. They needed a particular thing to organize, like choices of learning. The immediate thing was there's all these dedicated platforms that do this but, in the end, they just repurposed the Trello board to do that. I would look at the technology that people are using now and consider how can you repurpose that to get what you want rather than introducing new technologies all the time, which sounds a bit counterintuitive for someone who loves technology so much, but I think just leveraging what you've got and using it more as a general principle is the starting point.

Arun Pradhan:

Having said that, my one exception is if you haven't gotten enterprise social network platform... Slack is my favourite but there's also Teams and there's Workplace... if you haven't got something like that, that's just a necessity right now, I think. Personally, I don't think your Yammer or those sorts of products do the same as what the Slack, Teams, and Workplaces try to do. There's probably some more, which I'm not aware of. I think Asana might be moving in that space. I haven't checked that one out yet, but it provides a digital workplace. These are rooms where you're working, but it happens to be digitally.

Arun Pradhan:

Certainly, in my experience, direct experience as just being a worker in those environments, it's a game changer because one of the things that you lose without face-to-face is that serendipitous kind of conversations, they're sort of being able to just walk past a meeting and just say, "Oh, so what's happened there?" because you suddenly realize that people are like talking about something that might be relevant for you, that sort of connection you can have with whatever they use: channels or rooms or whatever the platform you use. You can actually get some visibility over what else other people are working on, and you can get more serendipitous connection and collaboration.

Arun Pradhan:

That's my biggie is forget about learning teach... not totally but initially. If you haven't got like a Slack or a Teams or something going and that's not been supported to actually get in the business, start there because that's going to support their work and it allows you to run learning programs and learning interventions through their workflow much more efficiently.

Michelle Ockers:

You mentioned a couple of tools, say, which you don't necessarily need to do a big IT rollout on you can just start using, which Slack and Asana are examples of those, as opposed to Workplace for instance, which will require you to engage quite heavily with your IT department who, quite frankly, are probably being slammed right now.

Arun Pradhan:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

This may not be the highest priority, but don't let that hold you back exploring other options because there some that are-

Arun Pradhan:

Honestly, I almost applied for jobs. I almost applied for job at Slack when it came out because I just love the thing so much. I don't get paid for it, but I recommend Slack just to

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anybody because it's free for a lot of basic usage. You can just collaborate so much more effectively. The trick is managing your notifications so you're not just getting interrupted all the time, but it can be used for evil as well as goodness, like any platform, like any tool. But I think it's a must for digital collaboration these days, something like that. But, yes, slack is my preferred option and it's got that free option as well.

Michelle Ockers:

This last part of the conversation for listeners links nicely with the episode I did with Jane Bozarth on showing your work and that idea of serendipitous discovery and connection through exploring each other-

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah, absolutely, whether you're showing your work, working out loud. It's the way that you can do that really effectively.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely, and easily as well. It's not such a big [inaudible 00:20:31] that it's difficult to get started. It's very straightforward to get started. What final words of advice do you have, Arun, for learning professionals who are trying to figure out how to use blended learning journeys in the virtual space?

Arun Pradhan:

Well, I think, initially, when you're getting started, maybe don't overcook it. Look at these stages. If you're running a virtual webinar, maybe it is just about how you're... it can be so simple. The engage piece might just be the one paragraph email you send out to pitch why this is important. The priming piece might be a quote from your CEO about how this is going to impact on everything or this other organization who's gone really successfully has used this same approach. That's as simple as it might be. Right? Then the apply and connect piece might be that you're just providing some curated content and just helping them work better in teams. The reflection piece might be getting a quote from them or something. It doesn't have to be heavy. A lot of the blends I do design are actually much bigger budget, bigger programs. Even when I've got a small budget program that I'm helping with, I use this framework, and it can be small interventions. Don't feel like you're saving this just for the big ones.

Michelle Ockers:

There's another nice linkage to one of our other Disruption series episodes with Megan Torrance, iterative development and minimum viable product. So listeners, go and take a look at that.

Arun Pradhan:

Nice.

Michelle Ockers:

There's really good linkages. I'm so pleased I was able to speak with you to wrap up the Learning Uncut series, the Disruption series.

Arun Pradhan:

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It was an honour. Thanks, Michelle. Congrats and kudos to you for being so responsive and being so adaptable that you've got this out at the beginning of things really changing and people really looking for these sorts of resources. That really reflects your adaptive mindset too. So kudos.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, thank you, Arun. Everyone's been really willing to engage with the series. For listeners, I will be doing a wrap up to summarize some of the key things. There's some really nice things and they can just... which will come out of these different conversations. I trust you found the whole series super useful. Thanks Arun.

Arun Pradhan:

Thanks a lot.

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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