

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to another Elevate episode. I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and culture, including the Brinja Yuin people on whose beautiful lands I live. And I'd like to pay respect to elders past, present and emerging. Welcome back to Learning Uncut. Nigel, Dr. Nigel Paine, you are now a doctor. I think that may have shifted since we last spoke. Welcome.

Nigel Paine:

I don't think it's that long, is it? It could be. I've had my doctorate for three years, so time flies, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

It has been more recent than that. But you didn't have your doctorate the first time we spoke with you on Learning Uncut, which was four years ago, August 2020. We were right in the throes of the pandemic, and I was running a special series, the Emergent series alongside Laura Overton and Shannon Tipton. And you appeared on an episode with Laura, hosted by Laura alongside Simon Brown from Novartis on the topic of culture and curiosity, which is kind of appropriate for today's conversation, which is about doing your fieldwork in L&D. But I looked back over the transcript and, you know, you didn't mention fieldwork once. Which today I don't think you would have a conversation about culture and curiosity in the context of the work of learning and development professionals without mentioning fieldwork. It feels like a recurrent theme. So tell us a little about what shifted in your thinking about organizational learning and the things we need to do in learning and development to support and enable it. And why? Why the shift?

Nigel Paine:

Sadly, I wish I had major shifts in thinking and light bulb moments and switch from one side to the other. The truth is that everything is incremental, it just builds. And I did a lot of hard research for my doctorate. And in that, I came across an academic called Davide Nicolini, who's Italian, but he works in the UK. So he's a great mind, I think. And his philosophy is on the theory of practice. And I was heavily influenced by the theory of practice. And a few lights came on. And two things Nicolini said that have resonated with me. The first is that we can't understand anything without consciously doing fieldwork. So I think previously it was unconscious. You had to get out there and explore, but it was unconscious, now it's conscious. I'm telling everybody I meet that you should never believe what people tell you. You should never focus on received opinion. You should never build on something that someone has told you to do without the evidence that that is what is necessary. So it's very much don't be an order taker. It goes back to that. It's very, very mainstream in a way. But what I'm saying is you consciously go out and you talk to people, you ask questions and you listen and you make sure that when someone says this is the problem, that genuinely is the problem. And I was heavily influenced by Chris Argyris, who talked about double loop learning. So you don't just look at the problem solution, you go problem, possible solution, is there an underlying problem? What is

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the solution to that? Is there an underlying problem? So you explore the complexity of what is going on. And I think that fieldwork is one way of embracing complexity, and recognising that you're not a stall pigeon as a learning and development professional. You are a thinking, sentient human being who doesn't simply sit there in their office and take orders. You get out there and you find out what's really going on. That's why I think fieldwork is really, really important.

Michelle Ockers:

There's also the other perspective of challenging our own thinking. Right. So you've talked there about just not taking on board what other people tell us. But going out and exploring our own biases get in the way and our own assumptions get in the way as well. So I would assume that fieldwork helps us to challenge those, too.

Nigel Paine:

Certainly does. The way it helps you challenge those is that if you're an L&D professional, you do tend to see the world in learning terms. It's like, you know, if you were a hammer, everything looks like a nail and all problems look like learning problems. And one of the beauties of fieldwork is you recognize that not all problems are learning problems or not all problems are solved by focusing on learning. They can be focusing on organizational structures. They can be focusing on processes. They can be focusing on developing the way the organization sees itself, feels itself, understands itself, rather than this individual has some kind of learning deficit. So I'm really, I suppose I've moved post-research into looking more holistically at organizations and taking a more systems approach and seeing the way people are squashed in systems and to kind of liberate them sometimes from those systems rather than focus on you got that wrong, there's something wrong with you, there's a deficit, we will make you perfect and whole. When if the system doesn't change, often the problem doesn't go away, it just manifests itself in different ways. So it's giving L&D the courage to look people in the face and say that is not a learning problem and it won't be solved by giving people some kind of learning process.

Michelle Ockers:

So your fieldwork helps you to gather the evidence and the confidence to be able to make that kind of argument. Nigel is what I think you're saying there. So what does fieldwork look like? Give me some examples.

Nigel Paine:

Yeah, I can give you three or four examples. But generally speaking, fieldwork is the answer to the question, there's a problem here. And the answer to that is, can I go and talk to these people? Can I find out myself what is really going on? So it's permission to explore, and permission, if you like, if we go back to curiosity, permission to be curious and say, well, it's strange that that seems to be manifesting in that part of the organization. But similar things are not going on in this part of the organization. Let me go and gather evidence. So the key thing to fieldwork. Well, there are three key things. The first one is you don't go in with the answer. You go in with questions. Secondly, you listen very carefully to the answers that you're being given. And thirdly, you explore beyond the answers. So someone might say, well, you know, they just don't know how to do sales training. So if you're talking to

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someone in sales and you say, what seem to be the problems that are holding you back? Why does that matter? How does that manifest itself? Why is that happening? So you begin a conversation. So it's really having exploratory conversations. with people in the organisation to get beyond the, there's a training problem, which is what a lot of L&D people are confronted with day in, day out.

Michelle Ockers:

To what extent does fieldwork require you to make observations? So rather than, and by observations, I mean to see things. So rather than just talk to people and ask questions, which is a key part of it, to get out and talk to people involved in an issue in the system, how essential is it that you also observe people in the workplace doing their work as part of this discovery process that is engaged, involved with field work?

Nigel Paine:

Yeah, it's important. And I think it's not just focusing on the individual, it's looking at the whole process. And sometimes the questions should be probing the connections. Because my belief in organizational learning is about people connecting. And Nicolini, for example, did field work in a surgical field unit in Italy. And what he observed when he asked people questions, they just gave him the procedures. They said, well, you know, we do this and we have this checklist and we go through one, two, three, four, five. But what he observed was that no one used the checklists. In reality, People had shortcuts and they knew that Michelle is the person I need to talk to. She knows the answer to that. I don't go through this elaborate process in order to find out the answer. I go and talk to Michelle. So what he discovered was that the way the field unit worked, was entirely different to the way that it worked on paper. And that was the essence of his learning. So, yes, he asked questions. Yes, he sat there quietly and observed. And it was that combination. But he spent something like two months in that unit. Now, if you say, well, that's a big problem. I think I need to spend two months in that to observe and to ask questions. You might get an answer that you weren't prepared for. So he was an academic and he can get away with that. So sometimes you've got to short circuit that by getting the questions, getting the links. So who do you talk to? Who gives you the answers? And so your observation is mediated, if you like, by the answer to questions. So you get some, not I'm in for 20 minutes, but that you think carefully about what's going on. You observe carefully. But you draw conclusions quite quickly because you have to, basically, because you're not an academic and you haven't got the luxury of two or three months of observation.

Michelle Ockers:

Sometimes just a day or two or joining a few critical activities, it can be really helpful. And I'm thinking of When I was at Coca-Cola Amatil, I was asked by the National Engineering Manager to have someone on my team go and join a long-tenured aging engineer who was about to walk out the door. He was coming up for retirement the following year. and they're going to lose a stack of knowledge. So can you have someone on your team shadow this guy and write down and find out everything he knows and turn it into courses and resources? I said to him, I think there might be something else going on here. Can you give me some time to go out and do some observations? So I got someone else from outside the organization who I knew was

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very good at social networks and understanding the dynamics between people. And we went out to several sites and we just spent, three days it took us, three days at three different production sites, doing some observations of, you know, the daily maintenance meetings, some people trying to troubleshoot some problems, running a root cause analysis session, tagging along with some of the guys to have a look at what they did on shift, talking to them. So if you have a problem with this machine and you don't know how to fix it, where do you go? Who do you talk to? Who do you turn to for help? What resources do you use? And we like just that three days, got to the bottom of a lot of opportunities to do things differently and come up with different solutions to getting knowledge flowing and helping people to do a much better job with troubleshooting and fixing problems in the production lines. It was amazing.

Nigel Paine:

Yeah, it is. You're absolutely right. I would never do a leadership program now without watching the leader. If I'm working with one or two or three, watching them in action, You know, I've sat quietly in leadership team meetings, in meetings led by a particular leader. I say absolutely nothing, I just watch. And I can see virtually every issue just on the table, right in front of my eyes, that I would have possibly missed by just talking to individuals. So you're right, you're 100% right that you need to get your, it's getting your hands dirty. It's not living in a kind of hermetically sealed area, thinking about big thoughts about learning and learning theory and structuring courses and instructional design. Because Brinkhoff said, often when there's a failure of learning, it's got nothing to do with the learning, it's to do with the context. So, you know, people operate in context. And I think context is really important. And you only understand context by being in the context. You can't understand it any other way. You can't say to someone, explain the context. Because by explaining it, they distort it by its very nature. But when you're there, you can see and you understand. And often, just as you found out, it's more complex than it appears superficially. And it's not that there's an old buffer, go tag him along for a couple of days. You'll have got all his lifelong knowledge and just write it down and we're done. It's not like that at all.

Michelle Ockers:

No, it's not. It's not. There's a really good example, which I'll pop in the show notes from one of our Learning Uncut episodes. A company called CodeSafe was engaged to work with a health and safety officer in an organization that installed ceiling insulation, and they were having some issues, some safety incidents, and they wanted to figure out why people weren't following the safe work procedures, and they decided it was because lots of them had English as a second language. They were reading and signing things they didn't understand, so they were going to video, turn all the safe work procedures into videos. The first time they went out on site to video someone doing the procedure of climbing up a ladder into a ceiling to install these insulation bats. The guy didn't follow the written process. And they said to him, why are you doing it this way? He said, I cannot physically do it the way it's written down. It's physically impossible with the ladders that we're given. So all of a sudden, the problem was the equipment, not the process. It's like just by going and observing again, like that's a very short exercise to do that. So one reason or one thing that would trigger you, let's talk about some of the triggers. One thing that would trigger

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you to go out and do your fieldwork is if someone comes to you with a problem or asks you to provide a solution and you want to understand the problem better. Are there any other things that might trigger you to go out and do some fieldwork?

Nigel Paine:

Yeah, I think if, for example, an organisation has five strategic goals, and you're told what can you contribute to the success of these goals, I think each one of those will initiate a little bit of a fieldwork experience. Because if you want to increase turnover or minimise errors or whatever it might be, the only way you can profoundly understand those is to do your fieldwork and stop blaming people. It kind of drives me crazy when this focus on individuals and that they are either good people or useless people. And often neither of those things are true. They're people who work in a context which leads them wrong. There was a great example in a water company where they brought in an electrician and he did something. He opened a tap and he let out hundreds of gallons of pollution into the river. And he realized what had happened very, very quickly and he turned the tap off and then went and apologized. He said, look, I'm sorry I did this. The company that employed him fired him. They said, you idiot, you should never have done that, it's terrible. The water company that he'd gone into came back and said please don't fire him we want to give him an award and they said, what are you talking about, anyway they brought this guy in and they thanked him publicly saying you put your finger on a major weakness in our systems which we've now eradicated without you having done that we would never have found it out. And the fact that you reacted so quickly meant that you absolutely minimized the problem that we faced. But it could have been a catastrophe. So you averted a catastrophe, and you've stopped that ever happening again. Please, will you reinstate his? So the guy was reinstated in his job. So again, the easy solution is, he's an idiot, blame him, then the more profound solution is to observe what's going on, recognise there's a system's failure, not an individual failure and fix the system. And what's going to last longest, firing the guy and telling him he's an idiot or fixing the system? Clearly fixing the system. It's pretty obvious isn't it? It's profound stuff, Michelle. I really think this is incredibly important. And you're getting at the kind of nub of what's going wrong in organisations and sometimes what's going wrong in the process of trying to fix organisations.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. There's one other possible trigger that you posted about recently on LinkedIn after the Learning Technologies UK conference. this year, 2024, you posted a bit of a summary of action points. And one of them was conduct field work to identify barriers where you're encouraging L&D professionals to regularly engage in field work within the organization to directly observe and understand the barriers that hinder effective work and learning. I'm almost imagining like once a quarter, everybody in the L&D team downs tools and just spends the day getting out into the workplace, having a look talking to people, and then just sort of coming back almost like a SWAT team, you know, what did we find? What could we focus on fixing and improving? And where can we reduce the friction points over the coming quarter?

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Nigel Paine:

There's a great question, Michelle, which I asked probably thousands of people to use. The question is, what stops you doing your best work?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Nigel Paine:

And if every L&D person went out and said to people in the organization, what stops you doing your best work? They'll get answers. And often the answer is not, oh, we've got to rebuild this. We need a million dollar investment. Often the answer is, well, if I didn't have to fill in this form, if I didn't have to get permission to do that, when it's obvious that it's going to go ahead, it's simple things. And if you can take simple barriers away, it's not a learning or development issue. But if you can take away those obvious and annoying barriers that frustrate the hell out of people, then you suddenly see an upsurge, A, of productivity, but B, of happiness. There's nothing worse than working with one arm behind your back, knowing that this is going to happen again and again and again. So what stops you doing your best work? That's what I mean by taking away barriers. That's a great question. There are things that are fixable. Some things aren't. You know, you've got to acknowledge that as well. Let's move to a totally brand new building with all the right modern gods. That's not possible, but there are lots of things you can do to alleviate problems and often it's petty bureaucracy that drives people utterly insane, over-controlled, ridiculous constraints imposed on individuals and a lack of trust. So, you know, sometimes if you go, what's the underlying cause? The fundamental underlying cause is we don't trust anyone to do anything without us keeping an eye on them. And sometimes you've just got to say, well, let's move into a more trusting environment and see what happens. And the answer is things get better. Things don't get worse.

Michelle Ockers:

Very true. So Nigel, for people in L&D who are listening to this conversation, and they want to either start doing some fieldwork or improve their use of fieldwork, what are useful tips to get them moving or improving their fieldwork?

Nigel Paine:

There's some really useful points to start the process. And the first point is to say, oh, that's a very interesting problem that you're outlining. Would you mind if I just went to investigate that a little bit further? So you've got to find a way in so that when someone says they need training, you don't say, no, they don't. You say, can I just talk to a couple of people? I can make the training much more tailor made. If you let me talk to a couple of people, very few organizations will say, no, just do what you're told they will say yes you can do that and then when you get it, that gives you your way in so the first thing about fielding is you need a way in yeah and you don't just say I don't care what you're saying I'm off doing my field work great way to get fired so that's the first thing you need a way in and then you need three or four really good questions, open questions that will tend to bring the problem and the issues and the challenges to the fore. And they're the ones that you've got to start to work on. And they're different to every organisation. Generally, they're about what frustrates you?

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What stops you doing your best work? There seems to be a productivity problem here. What do you think the issues are? It's asking people to be open and honest and to probe a little bit. But if you've got your clutch of four or five questions, That's enough to open up the scenario so that you can then go into more details. And I always say to people, give them an end in sight. Say, could I speak to you for 15 minutes or 20 minutes? Don't say, I'd like to talk to you open-endedly. It might take a day or two days, but we'll get there in the end. I think it's much better if you can say, all I need is 15 minutes. And few people will say, I'm far too busy to talk to you for 15 minutes.

Michelle Ockers:

Particularly if you're going to them and making it convenient, right?

Nigel Paine:

Yes, exactly. And on their terms, in their context, because people are busy, and you don't want to wreck their day for your sake. So if you work out the best way of opening up the situation, and that will be different for each organisation, and then you stick to it, then once you've done it a couple of times, it becomes much, much easier. You have the right conversation, you know the right questions to ask, and you get the right evidence. And I suppose that the final point is, you've got to listen and note and do something about it. So you need to unpack. You don't do 25 interviews and then go back and you can't remember what someone said at the first time. You need a field notebook and some time to reflect. You need reflection time to work it out. And a field notebook can be your phone. You can tape something. Field notebook can be AI. taking notes for you, whatever, it doesn't matter. Because you can do this, it's better face-to-face, but often that's impossible. You can do it online. We're talking perfectly sensibly. We're surrounded by millions of miles of water. We can't be much further apart, but we can have really good conversations because we approached it in the right way. It was structured, you had the right questions and so on. So in some ways, just imitate Michelle. That's the way to do it.

Michelle Ockers:

I'm sure people can do a much better job than that. I would just add one thing when you're listing off those questions, look for some positive or strengths based questions as well. So ask, you know, how do you solve problems when you run into problems with this? How have you gotten better at this in the past year? Yes, I think that's telling. Well, very useful. Nigel, thank you so much. You're always so generous and willing to share your insights. And I think fieldwork is an important, important aspect of our practice in L&D. And I'd like to encourage more people to do more of it.

Nigel Paine:

And I would echo that, Michelle. Thank you.

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Learning Uncut are learning and development consultants that help Learning and Development leaders and their teams become a strategic enabler so that their businesses can thrive. We work in evidence-informed ways to drive tangible outcomes and business impact and are strong believers in the power of collaboration and community. We specialise in helping to build or refresh organisational learning strategy, update their L&D Operating Model, enable skills development, and conduct learning evaluation. We also offer workshops to shift learning mindset and practices for both L&D teams and the broader workforce – as well as speaking at public and internal events.

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About your host, Michelle Ockers



Michelle is the co-founder and Chief Learning Strategy at Learning Uncut. She is an experience, pragmatic organisational learning strategist, L&D capability builder and modern workplace learning practitioner. She also delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events.

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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