

Michelle Ockers:

So listeners, you probably just heard the intro, which said that Michelle Parry-Slater is the host of the Learning Uncut Elevate podcast episodes. But today we're turning the tables. It's Michelle Ockers here, and I'm going to be in conversation with you, Michelle Parry-Slater about your wonderful book, The Learning and Development Handbook. So welcome as a guest.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

It feels strange already, but thank you.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, you have been a guest several times on the Learning Uncut Elevate podcast before you were working alongside me in Learning Uncut. And I'll pop some links to those previous episodes in show notes because people may want to explore your practical wisdom and insights further after this conversation. So let's kick off in the spirit of reconciliation by acknowledging the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community, including those of the Brinja-Yuin people on whose land I sit today, and Michelle?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

On the Kombumerri people's land today.

Michelle Ockers:

As always, we pay our respect to elders past and present and to any Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders peoples who are listening today. So Michelle, I'm going to start off with a slightly different question to normal here. If you were choosing just three words or small phrases to describe yourself to someone who doesn't know you, and some of our listeners may not know you very well, what three words or small phrases would you choose?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

So I live my life by my three values. So I could choose those three words, which are challenge, excellence and transparency. But I'm going to steal three phrases instead. I find absolute joy in making a positive difference in the world. And so that's what I bring or try to bring to everything that I do, whether it's volunteering at Girlguiding or whether it's in my professional life or whether it's being a parent, just try and make a positive difference in the world. And I think the other phrase really is that I do genuinely feel like I exist to serve. So particularly my profession and my professional community. So wherever I can add value and support others, then that's really part of who I am. Yeah, so more than three words, apologies.

Michelle Ockers:

So I've actually got two there, positive difference, making a positive difference, existing to serve. What was the third one? Did I miss it?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

Well, my values challenge, excellence and transparency.

Michelle Ockers:

How does working in learning and development, either broadly or specifically in the way you've chosen to work through consultancy, through working with a wider number of organisations, how does that help you to express some of these qualities.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

Definitely when it comes to excellence I think I'm a better practitioner because I see the stories of lots of different organisations and that's really helpful. It also enables me to come in and be that voice of challenge. Now when I say challenge I'm not talking about being obstreperous, trying to be difficult. What I'm doing is just saying, well, what have we got now? How can we perhaps make that better? And I think that feeds into my need to serve. We're all here to kind of, I think, make our profession better, but also our workplace is better for others in our communities. So there's definitely the opportunity for challenge. When it comes to transparency, I don't know if it's because I've got a poor memory, I have to be transparent. I can't tell fibs, I'm very honest, too honest, my mum says I'm too honest. But when it comes to transparency, helping to hold up a mirror in an organisation, and offer that lens, that view, because people often will hide and there's a bit of smoke and mirrors kind of in organisations, but when we can have really robust, productive, honest conversations, then it means that we can move forward.

Michelle Ockers:

My observation to this point of working more closely with you is that you are really good at inviting people into the space, whatever that space is, whatever that conversation is. And you have this really natural way of making it okay to go to places that we might otherwise avoid, Michelle. So I'm learning a lot from, particularly from facilitating alongside you or watching you in action. So thank you for that. And I think some of these, I see in your book, these qualities expressed. So let's get into the book and I might anchor back some observations to these qualities that you've just run us through, which you hold so dear. And in a lot of ways, I think our standards that you hold yourself accountable to in your own practice and life as well, based on my observations. So the Learning and Development Handbook, second edition released in, was it 2024?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

September, yeah. Just a few days before I moved to Australia, actually.

Michelle Ockers:

Wonderful. What a way to transition from one country to another. So why did you write this book and who were you holding in mind as you wrote it?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

I was really clear. And actually that was part of the book proposal process. If ever you're writing a book, you have to go through a proposal and it's really useful for

Learning Uncut Elevate Episode 46

Elevate 46: The Learning and Development Handbook – Michelle Parry-Slater

helping you determine who is your audience. And I was really clear. I was writing to younger me. It's almost like a letter to myself. younger me fell into learning and development, and I think many of us do. We don't sit there in the classroom when we're five years old and say, Miss, Miss, when I grow up, I want to be in L&D. We all want to be train drivers or doctors or astronauts. So I wrote this book for somebody who kind of felt a little bit overwhelmed in the space I'd found myself in. How did I get here? What do I really know? That whole imposter syndrome thing. But I had some really, really good mentors and great community around me. So Donald Taylor had the learning and skills community that I just found those webinars really useful. My director, Katherine Marlow, really useful. And I wanted to be kind of that mentor, if you like, to young me. What would young me have needed when I came into learning and development? But that said, that's my initial audience, that's who I was writing to, but it's not the only audience for the book, because a lot of people have responsibility for learning and development, but it's not in their job title, so they might work in people and culture or in HR or they're a line manager of a large group and they're responsible for their development. So the book is also to those people as well. And the reason that that's important is because when I wrote the book, thinking of those people, they're just going to dip in and out. They're not going to start at the beginning and go to the end. And so I wanted to write something which enabled them to dip in and out. So there's lots of lists, there's lots of thinking questions, there's the short reads and the long reads, because, I mean, let's face it, who has got the time to read all of the books that we would like to read? And so that's sort of a handbook to guide younger me and a handbook to guide people who've got L&D responsibilities.

Michelle Ockers:

The fact you call it a handbook, gives a signal that it is meant to be dipped in and out. So how do you imagine someone actually using this book in their day-to-day L&D work? And maybe if you can unpack a little bit more around, there's a consistent chapter structure, which is very interesting and unusual. And what's the relationship between the way you've structured the chapters and how you imagine someone actually using the book in practice?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

That's a really interesting question actually, because I did think long and hard about how would I use that book? So I thought what I need is when I'm going to have that conversation with a senior person and I'm perhaps feeling a little bit anxious, can I give myself some reassurance? What questions could I ask? I'm thinking about, I don't have a lot of time when I'm commuting, maybe I can read the book on the train. So essentially I wrote the book as a pickup, put down kind of guide on the side. You absolutely don't need to start at the beginning and finish at the end. And the chapter structure is familiar throughout. So there is a short read, which is almost like a blog length. So maybe five, 10 minutes gets you thinking about the topic. If that's something that you're interested in, then there's the longer read, which unpacks more of what we've looked at in the short read. And then there's always a case study. Now, you know from this podcast, Michelle, the value of case studies, the value of looking at somebody who's done this before you and helping you to align what you're thinking about with some fresh thinking from somebody else. So there's

Learning Uncut Elevate Episode 46

Elevate 46: The Learning and Development Handbook – Michelle Parry-Slater

always a case study. And then in the book I reflect on the case study. So I try to be that guide to somebody reading the case study. What can we pull out from it? What's useful? And then we go into the set lists. Now this is four kind of different areas that you may find you need to think about for yourself. So what is your mindset? What is your data set, for example? And then we head over to some tips. So somebody who is experienced in learning and development just wants a few tips and ideas about that. There's a list right there for them. And then if you want to dig a bit deeper, there's the thinking questions list. And then finally, we've got sort of the action plan and the library list. So the library is, you know, where I've got my inspiration from pointing towards other people. But of course, the action plan is what actions can you take. So it almost is like 14 mini little books rather than 14 chapters. But it could be that all you do is look at the top tips. All you do is read the short reads. I hope that it's accessible that way. for everybody because, you know, I just appreciate people are busy.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it feels really accessible. I think it's not only as you say for younger you for those newer to L&D or it's not the primary role while it does serve them really well with the thought you've taken on the structure of the book. I think there's something in it for the more experienced practitioner, particularly if they maybe want to think about or rethink their practice in the contemporary L&D setting and maybe challenge themselves to improve some aspects of their practice.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

Thanks for mentioning that because actually we all need to get better at this. We all constantly need to be getting better at this. So somebody who has been in L&D like me for 20 years, I'm still learning. I'd like to hope you're still learning too, Michelle. You just talked about how I've taught you things and we've been working together. So actually, we may not have thought about consultative L&D, we may not have thought about blending our learning, we may not have thought about strategies in learning and development. So that's why the book has that value to that more experienced audience as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So you mentioned overwhelm, that it can be overwhelming being new to learning and development. And it just seems to be getting more overwhelming all the time with different models, different technologies. lots of different requests from the business. How can a reader decide where to start or what to focus on out of these 14 different parts of the book or chapters in the book rather than trying to do everything?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

The overwhelmed question is a good question, and I feel it right now. I'm sure others are feeling it too, in the light of, you know, just this week, for example, in Australia, as we're recording, the interest rates have gone up. So this is that geopolitical landscape, that socioeconomic landscape, which impacts our work and impacts our life and our thinking. I'll keep it light. We won't go into those levels of detail, but I just want to acknowledge the overwhelm is real. And so to your point, where do we start? I think start with something you can control. Start with something that you have got

some influence around and take a tiny trial. And that's one of the reasons why I've done all of the lists in the book and the thinking questions in the book, because if you start with nothing else, you know, often I'll just take my dog for a walk with a question in my mind and think about it. It's a really easy way in to just considering, well, you know, we're always doing courses, is there an alternative way? We may have heard people talk about moving from courses to other things. What would that look like in my context? What would it look like if I could just trial one experiment. So that might be just somewhere to start to think differently. But there's so many opportunities in the book with questions, with lists, with influences, with the stories that people can just pick it up, have a look. What does that do for them?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So the whole idea of start where you are and try something. Isn't it a repeated encouragement throughout? And I will say, I hadn't realised that you were thinking about your past mentors and being a mentor through the book, but your tone is so deliberately gentle and encouraging that I think that comes through. So interestingly, Michelle, one of the pondering questions you mentioned there is, well, what are my options other than courses? How might I start doing other things? And one of the things you say many times in the book, and I've heard you say it in person as well. You talk about the right solution for the right problem for the right people at the right time. Man, there's a lot of things to try to get right in there, right in that mix. So how do L&D practitioners actually figure out what is the right solution for the right problem for the right people at the right time? What does that look like in practice?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

It really does come up in the book many, many times, that sentence, because I feel like it's really important and it's worth reiterating and reiterating. And I think, how do we actually do that? Well, where we can, and I appreciate this isn't always possible, but we start earlier in the process. So be nosy. Seek to find out what drives your business, what do people talk about, what do they care about. I think when we be a member of staff ourselves first rather than be a learning and development professional, then we are experiencing what other people are experiencing. How are we onboarded? How do we access learning? What is interesting to us? What do we talk about as a member of staff? So if we can possibly ask to join meetings in adjacent teams, if we can get into product discussions, manufacturing discussions, whatever your business is about, if we can be in the thick of it, It helps us to really understand what do people care about here. And I was talking to somebody just the other day and they said, oh, I always sit in the canteen. That is my absolute favourite. If you can sit where people are, if you can be amongst it, then you can understand what are the problems. And they're not the problems necessarily that the managers are coming to you saying, oh, Michelle, there's a problem with this. I need a course. Actually, you can reflect the voice of the learner, so to speak. So that's really where I would start. But of course, it's not always possible. So where you can't do that, at least what we can do is ask better questions. So when that manager comes along and says, Michelle, I need a course on this, and I've had some performance conversations, and I can identify that there's a problem, well, how do you know? What isn't working? Show me the data that you have. What would it look like if it was working? What would it look like if it was really working excellently? So

Learning Uncut Elevate Episode 46

Elevate 46: The Learning and Development Handbook – Michelle Parry-Slater

we can start to ask better questions. I mean, one of the questions I love asking is the how do you know question. It's a power question, isn't it? Yeah, people just guess or they make an assumption based on some information. I always try and triangulate my evidence so that you've not just got one person's opinion, but you're looking at it from various different opportunities. And sometimes doing nothing is actually the answer. You know, letting it go for a little bit longer, for example. So trying to ask better questions at least is a good place to start if we can't be nosy and push our way into the rest of the business.

Michelle Ockers:

So that gets you part of the way there to what's the right problem to work on at the right time, and maybe even who are the right people, but how do you then figure out what's the right solution? What's the approach there?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

That's such an interesting question. I would always suggest that the solution will become apparent if you've asked enough questions, if you've got enough data. Where I think it goes a little bit wrong is that we anchor ourselves to stuff that's worked in the past, or we anchor ourselves to stuff we like or we're interested in. Oftentimes, you know, if people, I don't know, do personality profiling, then their go-to is, well, we'll do some personality profiling, that will help us with the answer. Or if the go-to is, I really love creating e-learning, then we'll just create some e-learning. So I try really carefully to encourage people to let the answer emerge. And if the answer's not emerging, if the solution isn't really becoming apparent, then I would suggest we haven't got enough data. And so don't jump to what you already know. It's a risk there. If we just jump to what we already know, everything looks like, the whole sort of shape that we're trying to fill looks like e-learning, profiling, blended, facilitation, whatever that, does that make sense?

Michelle Ockers:

It does and, you know, being aware of our own natural biases and go-tos is an important part of that picture, as is looking up and looking out and staying abreast of what others are doing, which means, of course, listening to lots more Learning Uncut podcast episodes, people. And in the book, you offer alternatives to courses, you talk about different approaches. So, that's another great start point for people to become more aware of what else is available. Why does blended learning become such an important anchor point in the book? It's chapter eight. It's right at the end of part one. So there's seven other chapters leading to it. But in many ways, it ties everything together. And I've got to say, I almost feel like that would be the chapter I would say to people, go to part eight first. Sorry, chapter eight first in part one, in a lot of ways, because it does tie things together. So why is blended learning such an important anchor point in the book?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

I think that it's my approach. A lot of people have been surprised, you know, so why is your sort of solution-based chapter so far into the book? And I think what we do in L&D is often we jump to solutions. We say, oh, well, I run a leadership program in that organisation, so I'm just gonna do the leadership program in this organisation.

Learning Uncut Elevate Episode 46

Elevate 46: The Learning and Development Handbook – Michelle Parry-Slater

It's not gonna work. I'm sorry to burst your bubble, but it won't work because you're in an entirely different context with an entirely different set of people. So this is why right solution for the right problem, for the right people at the right time, delivered in the right way, and that right way will become emergent through your conversations and questioning. But generally speaking, the right way will always be blended. Now, in the book, I call it blending, and I do that deliberately. It's an active verb. It's something that is ongoing. To blend is a singular thing, but when we are constantly blending, because you might need to flex and change depending on who's coming through your programs, what you did last year might not be right for this year's cohort of people, for example. So it's an ongoing process where we can plug in together the right things based upon, for example, the learning that has already been done, people, what they're coming in with, you know, that may be different. So I feel like that's sort of the culmination but it's at that point in the book, because if you don't do the foundational work, I don't think you'll know what the emergent solution will be. And that foundational work is really the chapters one through seven. It's really understanding what is your digital offer? What is your social offer? What do people think about learning and development? But even before that, what is the strategy of the organisation? How do you know what that strategy is? You know, what is the, opportunity for you to influence and to work within that strategy. And so there's lots of sort of scene setting in the early part of the book, a lot of stakeholder engagement, how do I get myself and be nosy and get into those meetings that I talked about earlier? And how am I more consultative in learning and development? And I think if we work through those processes, then what we get to by the time we get to solutions is something that we are confident will work, because it is the right solution for the right problem for the right people, and so on. And so that's why it's at that point. And it's also why it's an ongoing process, not a once and done thing.

Michelle Ockers:

I understand. So you're inviting people to almost use the structure of part one as a thinking process. You know, here's all the things you need to be thinking about, some of the actions you need to take before you get to the right blend.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

I think it's really important that we're clear on what we're trying to make before we start to make it. And yet so many times we feel like, especially when we're reactive, we need to put something out quickly. We need to be seen to be busy, seem to be doing stuff. So rewriting the narrative within an organisation that actually working on your strategy, working on your base, your foundation is the work. It isn't just about working on the solutions. You will build a better house if you build that house on firm foundation rather than on sand.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So of the different approaches to learning that you might put into a blend, what do you think deserves more attention than it gets? What do you think is most typically underutilised or poorly utilised and presents an opportunity for us to lift our game with our blends?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

I think one of the things is social learning. So what do I mean by that? It's people talking to other people, people being with people, people being influenced by other thinking. It's the stories. It's the opportunity for us to listen to case studies and take from them. And the reason that's so fundamentally important, it is our absolute base level of learning. We've done it for millennia. We do it as children. It's the first thing we do when our babies are born and we tell them little stories and they learn about their surroundings and their families and their world from story, from social learning, from people learning from people. I do make the very clear distinction in the book. This is not social media. A lot of people think social learning equals social media. Social media is a tool. It isn't social learning. Social learning as I define it is people learning from people. So that might be in an action learning set. It might be in a community of practice. It might be in a book club. It might be just in a chat. It might be in a walk with another person. But what we tend not to do in L&D is we sort of don't include that. We include more formal things like courses and e-learning and live online sessions, which are all really important. But I think when we think about how do people learn in your organisation, if you've been sitting in the canteen and you're listening and people are having really robust conversations, then there's a great place to be able to start feeding questions in. There's a great opportunity for you to go where they are and play in the spaces that they already are at. I'll give you one example. I was brought in to do a leadership program and we said, well, can we blend in any way? You know, can we do something digital? And they said, no. It's retailers, nobody has access to digital. They're on the shop floor. Nobody's doing anything digital at all. So it'd be a waste of time. And this was the L&D team who were buying us in to do this work, telling us that we go to these in-person workshops where people have come from all over the country. They all know each other because they've all got a WhatsApp group and they're all chatting to each other, they're sharing, you know, gondola ends, this is what I've put on my gondola at the end, and this is what's selling well in my store. I've put this front of store, this is how it's going for me. It was all happening, and the L&D team had absolutely no idea. And so going to the playground that people are already playing in tends to be that more informal space. And if we can bring that in, if we can, you know, perhaps seed those conversations, then we can do things that are very useful within our organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

So you're suggesting we go to those spaces. So in this case, would you go and ask if you can join the WhatsApp groups?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

100% because what I'm seeing there is if you're in the WhatsApp group and you're seeing what they're chatting about, you're seeing real need. You know, you're seeing, for example, no one's buying this particular product, you know, and you're seeing them making suggestions, we raise it higher on the shelf, lower it down on the shelf, and move it to a different part of the store. And you're seeing the problems that they are actually having day to day. And that means that you can create a formal learning solution which addresses these. For example, a new retail manager coming into a store, these are the problems that you're gonna have. And we know them

Learning Uncut Elevate Episode 46

Elevate 46: The Learning and Development Handbook – Michelle Parry-Slater

because it's not anecdotal evidence, it's factual evidence that we've already got. So it helps us to take a more evidence-based approach. It's just another place that we can play. But it's not just about us being nosy and picking up that formal space, it's actually being able to do things that are on topics that people are talking about that are more useful to them rather than guessing what we think they know. It goes back to how do we know? Well, I know it because this is what people are saying they're struggling with.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it's so interesting. You've just reminded me that when I was working with Laura Overton and Shannon Tipton as part of our Emerging Stronger initiative during and shortly after the pandemic, one of the things we did was create a series of tools that people could use. They're available freely for download, but one of them was cultivating learning in workplace communities, which was not about setting up brand new communities of practice, which we often try to do and saying to people, come and join this community of practice, but finding out where people were already interacting and going and observing what was happening in those spaces, how people were learning and thinking about how you could seed and nourish more learning in a more deliberate way without squashing it. That's not the purpose, but just helping to cultivate learning in those spaces where people are already connecting and learning from each other. So I think that's kind of consistent with what you're doing.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

It's really important. And I remember years ago when I was global head of learning, I implemented a platform where people could talk to each other and they didn't have a global space before that. So what ended up happening was I was almost like the glue. So somebody would raise a question, but because I'd been all around back in the day, face-to-face traveling all around Europe, you know, in front of people, I knew a lot of people in the organisation. So when somebody in Marseilles asked a question, I thought, oh yeah, the guy in Amsterdam, he's going to have the answer to that. And then you become the facilitator to connect to the experts. And that social learning in action, what eventually happened was they all got to know each other through the platform. And my role became what I thought was redundant. And that's when I left that role. But what was interesting is six months later, I happen to need to call back into the organisation. And I found that those conversations are falling away. So don't underestimate the value of a community manager, somebody who is oiling and gluing the communities together. And that's the role that I can see us playing in social learning as an L&D in an organisation. We're there sort of saying, have you tried this? What about that idea? Or here's a resource that might be useful for you. What do you think? And then we end up the conversation around that. There's definitely space for us to play in these informal places in a more active way.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. And you've just reminded me of a conversation you and I had with Don Taylor on, it was Learning Uncut episode, I think it was 175. I will find it, 175 or 176. I'll put it in the show notes, about his most recent report alongside Egle Vinauskaitė about AI in L&D, the race for impact. And he had a number of new models for L&D,

which he thought were emerging. And one of them was the enablement partner. I think some of what you're talking about there fits into that role. But there was another one, which you got very excited about. And I think it links to another recurring theme in your book. And he called it the adaptation engine, which was basically the idea that L&D isn't a standalone function, but part of a multidisciplinary team that addresses business challenges holistically and builds adaptability across the organisation. And I think your observation at the time was, man, this sounds a little bit like OD, organisational development, and you talk a fair bit about OD, at different points in the book. It's kind of like this little thread without banging the drum too much. You do see them as separate, OD and L&D, but you talk about them having a relationship with each other. What is OD? I think there's a lot of confusion about that. What is OD and how do you see OD and L&D relating to each other?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

So I think if you ask 10 different OD practitioners, you probably get 10 different answers to the question, but for me, how I see it, and I see it as a cousin, we're like cousins to each other in a way, organisation development is structures, systems, stakeholders, and strategies all working symbiotically. And I think that they serve a mission and they fuel a culture. And so that's how I approach organisational development. And I think about, well, do we have the right system in place for this learning to work? Do we have the right stakeholders in the conversation for this learning to work? What structure is in place? And is that going to allow that learning to work? So this is when I talk about this sort of symbiotic both within OD, those structures, systems, strategies, and stakeholders work together, but working in learning and development with an OD mindset, this is what I think about. And I can't not think in that way. I never really realised that I did think in this way. It was just always how I've approached my work and life, until an organisational development practitioner pointed it out to me and said, you know, you think like an OD, And so I've always got this kind of lens on the world. And I really encourage other learning and development professionals to think more broadly, because what we do doesn't happen in isolation we create ripples in organisations, L&D serves that organisation development purpose. And indeed, the people function, I think, also serves organisation development. Not everyone agrees with me on that from a people and culture perspective. But the L&D strategy, for example, needs to come from business strategy and even potentially from the people and culture strategy, but it can't sit in isolation. If we create an L&D strategy sitting in isolation, those ripples are just going to hit barriers. They're not going to actually work. So I feel like this is where we all need to kind of work together. We need to have a good view on the organisation. I think OD determines things like the structure, the teams that we have and the capabilities, I've done a lot of organisation design work, and I always start with what activities do we need to take place? What are the activities? Then we look at the capabilities, and then we look at the people in the organisation. So of course, L&D fuels those capabilities. It enables people to be redeployed or re-skilled if an organisational structure is shifting. So there's definitely a balance and a supportive relationship. And it all really comes back to having that sort of systems thinking mindset, really, And so I don't see how we in L&D can ignore that sort of macro thinking, that bigger picture thinking, that more holistic view.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it really came through this idea of systems thinking with the work I did with the AITD and the capability framework. But also it's kind of a part of the performance consulting approach, which we've been talking about for quite a while in learning and development and fixing with your idea of the right solution because the right solution could be outside of L&D or L&D could be just one piece of the right solution when you think of it that way. It feels like when I hear you talking about just then about organisation development, rather than us thinking about it as a team or a position in an organisation, it's more about a mindset and an approach and a set of practices underpinning how we work and how we work with other teams, particularly other teams in people and culture. So even if you don't have an OD team formally set up, there's still this organisational development mindset and working together across not only the people and culture function, but with other stakeholders who help determine some of those aspects of systems and structure and so on in the organisation.

Would that be a fair way of kind of reflecting back what you've just said?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

100% absolutely. You don't need to have OD in your title or even have OD in your organisation to think like an OD professional and have that more holistic picture. If you're looking for resources, the work that Paul Taylor Pitt did with his colleagues at the NHS is fantastic. They had a whole series of resources called Do OD, and they're freely available on the web. I'll make sure that you get the link, Michelle, for the show notes. It's just helping us to have and build that more holistic mindset and understand what ripples we are going to be creating and how they will influence the rest of the organisation. So that bigger picture, you know, thinking, if you like, and understanding where we do one piece of work, to your point, it might be a small piece of a bigger picture. It could also mean that we could do the best learning design in the world and it lands flat because the structure of that team isn't right. The culture of that team isn't right. The processes that they have aren't right, which has got nothing to do with us in L&D, but it has got everything to do with us when they look at us and they say, well, the training didn't work.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, grounding in the real world is the way Laura Overton and I have framed what we're trying to do there in the work we did in our book, which is a separate episode. Coming back to your thinking again, I want to move on to another idea that you present in the book, and it's up in part three of the book, which is where you're talking about strategies and some particular approaches or strategies for improving learning. And one of these is around the idea of evolution rather than revolution in learning and development. How do we decide what pace of change is right? You know, if we've come into an organisation and we're thinking, man, things need to change here, let's do some transformation. Is that going to work for us? revolution versus evolution and the pace of change. What are your thoughts there and your guidance or encouragement there?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

I love this question. I love thinking about the pace that you need to go at because I listen to my podcast, for example, as you know, on 1.5 speed and I run my life at that

speed. Everything is just at pace. One of my conscious decisions to move to Australia was to slow down my pace because I just run at everything. Because just life is so exciting and it's such an opportunity to get to my age and still be able to do all of this work. So what we need to do, I feel, to know whether our organisation is ready for evolution and revolution is to listen to your body, to listen to the body of the organisation, to recognize the pace of the organisation and does it serve it? Now, my pace when I lived in the UK didn't serve me well. It didn't serve my family. So let's make a conscious decision to make a change. So we had a revolution and moved to the other side of the world. Now, it isn't always everyone's opportunity or cup of tea to know, if you like, but if you become aware of the feelings of the organisation, if you're really in tune with the heartbeat, with the pulse of the organisation, it becomes a lot more easy to determine. Do we need to just rip this up and start again? Now there are a lot of problems to that. Sunk cost fallacy, for example, you know, we've already bought the LMS, we've already invested all of this time, it's not working for us, we'll just muddle through. But there's ongoing issues when you just muddle through and you don't have sort of that, that health of the organisation. There's so many health that we need to look at, like organisation, psychological safety, everyone's talking about psychological safety. I like to talk about psychologically healthy organisations. Sometimes we have good days, sometimes we have bad days. I like to talk about the fact that we have the health of the workforce and how motivated they are, and we notice those. It helps us to determine, you know, is this workforce ready for more learning? Actually, no, you know, big changes have happened, they're not ready for it yet, it just would feel like another thing to do. So being in tune with your organisation is really, really important. But how do we actually decide? Well, I think it is to do with that motivation, it's to do with that strategy, it's to do with how do you translate boardroom to frontline workers. I think that it's all about paying that exquisite attention to all of the different ripples. Somebody else lobbed a big stone in somewhere else, and that's rippling in and making an effect on whether we can run at pace with learning and change, or whether we need to actually dial it down and just wait for that natural type of rhythm. When I used to work in global mobility, we never did any learning at peak season, which is when everyone wants to move house, because what would be the point? You know, we've got people out on the trucks, we've got people out in houses looking for properties. So knowing the rhythm of your organisation, again, will help you decide. And one final idea on this is do some tiny trials. So to know whether your organisation is ready for a big revolution or whether you need to go at a slower pace. I think it's all about sort of getting the flotilla of boats heading in the right direction. How do you know? Well, just try a few boats. Like what if we tried it this way? What does it do for them? And I did this at Girlguiding, because I was told by several important people, we're not ready for digital learning. We're not ready to do this. Our workforce is volunteers from 18 to 88. And there was a judgment in that statement. So we ran digital trials. We ran a trial with Filtered, freely available case study on the web, and they loved it. The Girlguiding volunteers loved it. And so we had the evidence to go back and say, actually, I've got my finger on the pulse here and we're ready for a revolution.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, I think the voice of the people or the evidence from the people from the workforce carries a lot of weight, right? I once had Zoe Freeman, who at the time

Learning Uncut Elevate Episode 46

Elevate 46: The Learning and Development Handbook – Michelle Parry-Slater

was working with New Zealand Transport Agency, say to me around this topic of what's the right pace. She talked about, I love this phrase, sincere velocity. and to figure out what's the velocity that's going to work for this organisation. I think you come down on the side of evolution generally works better than revolution. Is there ever a case for revolution outside of a pandemic? Because we went through a revolution there. We had to, right? That was the burning platform. Have you ever seen revolution work well anywhere in shifting L&D outside of the pandemic?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

Yes, my proudest moment in work ever is when I was invited, when I was working, I've done a lot of work with the CIPD, the Chartered Institute for Personal Development, and I was working with them internally for a while, and it was at the time of George Floyd's murder in America. And you would think that the organisation which is designed to support humans in work would have all this stuff sorted. But actually what transpired as a result of that death was that there were people working within CIPD who were feeling like they weren't heard and were masking and not living as themselves. And I was asked by that community, an employee representative group, to host and hold a conversation amongst the entire staff so that we could do things differently. We could learn what it was like, what was the lived experience of that community within that workplace, and then change things. And that was a revolution. That was never been done before. There was an entire organisation on one Zoom call, and yeah, I'm very proud of that piece of work that we could help people to live a different life within the workplace. And it was shocking to many people that they'd sat alongside colleagues for years and then found that they'd always kind of not given them their whole selves because they didn't feel welcome in that organisation. So, yes, I think revolution does come from a major thing or a major need, a burning platform. And that burning platform could be a difference in the market, that stuff has changed. And I think we can't deny the burning platform that is AI at the moment and wrestling with the revolution that that brings, but wrestling with it correctly and rightly and having good conversations about it. And I recently had a good conversation about the ethics of AI and the assumptions of AI. And those conversations were taking place on LinkedIn. And so getting involved in community will help you to see the pace, help you to see, are we ready for the revolution? But generally, yeah, there is a burning platform that requires a big shift.

Michelle Ockers:

We have to be ready ourselves for that as well, right, to take the most of the opportunities, which is some of the stuff you talk about with foundations and our own professional development and making sure we are prepared to move when the opportunity arises. One of the things you advocate strongly, in fact, there's a whole chapter on reflective practice. Why is that so central to effective learning and how can we build it for ourselves as L&D professionals?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

It is a whole chapter because it's so important. Yeah, in the whole blending piece, I feel like it's often forgotten. We don't build in time for learners to reflect. We don't build in time for them to come back together a month, three months, six months after

the cohort perhaps has ended. And I think that that's a really hugely missing part of our learning offer. To be honest, but I believe we need to build in reflective practice so we can model it ourselves, and we can also offer it to others and the process is simple, even if it is the forgotten part, you know we get new information, a theory, an idea, a process, we apply that in our work. preferably not in a classroom, but in a real world setting or a modelled real world setting. And then we repeat it and we practice it. But really that skill or information, if it's mechanical, we gain the muscle memory. So that's an easy learn. But if it's more ethereal, if it's more thinking, cognitive, knowledge, work, environment, then reflective practices are, I think, where the learning actually happens. It's not until we realise we've learned something, we go from knowing to doing to believing, that actually we get the feeling of having learned something. And I think that that's when something shifts in us. And so that feeling of, oh, I'm more productive than I was before, or I'm not scared of difficult conversations because I've learned how to have them. And that shift only comes when we actually stop and look back and go, oh, yeah, you know, six months ago, I wouldn't have had that conversation. I wouldn't have spoken up at work. Great. You know, you've you've progressed. You've moved to do something. So we need those pause moments. We need those breathe and acknowledge moments. And it's why my UK based business is Kairos Modern Learning. Kairos is that moment when we come out of the chronological time and we give ourselves the opportunity to think, the opportunity to reflect and the opportunity to get those good ideas. It will have happened to so many of us. Oh, I have my best ideas in the shower or when I'm swimming or when I'm in the car. And it's because our mind is relaxed enough for us to let those reflective practices take place.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, I know you're a big fan of Nancy Kline's work and the idea of having a thinking partner as well. I mean, some of this reflective practice we can do on our own. What does the work of Nancy Kline bring to the mix in your mind and how have you found that useful to support your reflective practice?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

It's really changed my life. I learned about Nancy Kline from Meg Pepin, who taught me through the practitioner programs and I hugely recommend her work. And, you know, go to Megan and learn about how you can be a practitioner in Nancy's approach, it is all about creating a thinking environment for somebody else, holding space for somebody to think. And on paper, you'd think, well, I can do that by myself. I can go for a dog walk. Why wouldn't I just do that for myself? And you probably can. But when you have the accountability of somebody else holding space for you, it is so powerful, so powerful. And they can just help you to keep thinking. So we are taught from a tiny baby age to have what Nancy calls exchange conversation. One person talks, another person talks, and that means you're not truly listening because what you're doing is you're hearing and thinking about what you're going to say. When somebody is literally holding space for you to talk and all they are doing is listening to you, then the freedom for your thoughts to get to the end of your thought rather than be interrupted is phenomenal. So Nancy's latest books out a few years ago now, *The Promise That Changes Everything* is the promise that you won't be interrupted. And I really recommend that book because it's almost a culmination. She

started with Time to Think a decade ago. And this for me feels like she's refined the practice into this one book and it really is very powerful this very generously talking about how I invite people in, and I would, I would put that down to Meg, and how Meg's taught me to invite people in. Meg is an organisation development practitioner, she works within Nancy's practice. And that's why, because I know the brilliant brains that people have when they have time to think is phenomenal, the work that you can do. So yeah, reflective practice is all wrapped up in that work. And I have a thinking partner and I really appreciate our time together. It's a shared experience. I give her half the time. She gives me half the time and it's wonderful. Recommend it a hundred percent.

Michelle Ockers:

Such a gift. Thank you. As we move towards the end of the conversation, the last chapter of the book is where I want to take us. You talk about the title of the chapter actually is Hold Things Lightly and Celebrate. Have I got that right? Just checking, Hold Things Lightly and Celebrate Success is the title of the chapter. So what do you mean by holding things lightly? And what is your encouragement to L&D professionals to hold things lightly? What does that look like?

Michelle Parry-Slater:

It's the opportunity for us to remember, unless you are a brain surgeon, you know, or work in health care, the work that we do in learning and development is not life or death. The work that we do is still work. It is more important that we are balancing out with our work and our private lives. It's not sort of a life or death situation. And I think we're quite hard on ourselves as a profession because we exist to serve others. We exist to help others. And I'm not sure that we always get it right. But then we look at the evaluation score, oh, we only got seven out of 10. And then we beat ourselves up about the three we didn't get. But you got seven. So it's really an invitation to help us to realise that what's important, like really what's important to you as a human being, to your organisation, to your colleagues. And so I would really encourage people to just hold it lightly, have a trial, does it work? Does it not work? Try and be your own critical friend, but not your own critic.

Michelle Ockers:

Nice. I think that's a beautiful spot to finish. I think making a positive difference. You, the book, your work makes a positive difference. And that coming from that place of service, I think just oozes through the book and through the conversation, Michelle. And I've said it before, I'll say it again, I am delighted to be able to work so closely with you now and to learn from you. And I'm sure that the listeners are going to love all the resources we've curated here and the opportunity to reach out to you through LinkedIn if they want to explore things more fully or pick up any conversations off the back of what you've said. Thank you so much.

Michelle Parry-Slater:

Thank you, thanks for the opportunity to talk about it. And if anyone wants to connect on LinkedIn, then do feel free to do so. And some little note, because oftentimes on LinkedIn, we just send a connection and I always love to know, well, how did you find me? What is it that you're interested in talking about? We wouldn't just rush up to

Learning Uncut Elevate Episode 46

Elevate 46: The Learning and Development Handbook – Michelle Parry-Slater

somebody in the street and just throw our CV at them and run away. Really always try hard to encourage people when they use LinkedIn, It's a community tool. So we should invite with conversation and I'll always, always reply with a, how did you find me? I'm curious about what's working for you, what's not working and invite a conversation. Thanks so much.



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