

Learning Uncut Elevate Episode 49: Gari Yala - Speak the Truth | Indigenous Employment and the L&D Responsibility | Nareen



Young and Josh Gilbert

Michelle Parry-Slater:

Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. Today we have an Elevate episode. And as you know, if you've been a long-time listener, these episodes are designed to elevate our practice in learning and development. Before we begin, in the spirit of reconciliation, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community, particularly the Kombumerri People whose land I'm joining you from today. We pay our respects to their elders, past and present, and extend that respect to all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples present or listening today.

I'd like to welcome our wonderful guests. We have Nareen Young and Josh Gilbert, who are joining us from the University of Technology Sydney. I'll let them make their own introductions, but as a personal welcome, this is a conversation that I have wanted to have since I arrived in Australia nearly two years ago. Welcome, Nareen. Welcome, Josh. What country are you on today?

Nareen Young

Well, where I am, it is contested ownership. I am in fact descended from the traditional owners of what some people refer to as Gadigal. My family, we are Fowler descendants, are supporting the claim pursuant to the Native Title Act in New South Wales of the Gadigal people for formal ownership of this land, which is what we now call the inner city of Sydney.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Thank you, Nareen, Josh, hello.

Josh Gilbert

Hi. Yes, I'm Josh Gilbert. I'm a Worimi man and I live and work on country. So here on our country, and Gathang, which is our common language that we share with our neighbouring tribes, we say Yii barraba barray, Yii Worimi barray, Gathay nyiirun.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Help me out. I'm learning as I go. Help me out, what was that all about?

Josh Gilbert

It's our language, one of many Aboriginal languages right across Australia. But it's unique to our mid-north coast of New South Wales, and it says "who are you, what are you doing here? This is my country, this is Worimi country, and let us go together on our journey ahead."

Michelle Parry-Slater

Wonderful, thank you. It is an absolute pleasure to have both of you here today. Nareen, do you want to tell us a little bit about you and the work that you do?

Nareen Young

Yes, and we say here in our language of the Sydney Basin, we say Warami which is hello. At the Centre for Indigenous People and Work, I am the director, and Josh is the assistant director. I am also the Associate Dean of Indigenous Learning and Engagement at the Business School at UTS, and a Professor of Indigenous Policy at the Jumbunna Institute of Indigenous Education and Research, also within UTS. That is the Indigenous Institute within the university.

I have been an employment practitioner for a long time and have specialised in diversity employment practice, and been a leader in that space. I've led two peak bodies. About 11 years ago I started at one of the large Indigenous consulting firms, exclusively practising in employment for Indigenous people, and that's where Josh and I first worked together. Josh was very young in those days, and I was younger.

Eight years ago I was appointed to Jumbunna. We established the Indigenous People and Work Research and Practice Hub then, and a year ago, through a joint venture of Jumbunna and the Business School at UTS, we established a university centre for Indigenous People and Work. Josh is the assistant director, having worked with me on a whole range of employment things for the last 11 years, and having fashioned himself into a really prominent Indigenous employment practitioner in his own right. So he was the perfect person to be the assistant director.

Our centre aims to own the Indigenous employment narrative for Indigenous people. We are both Indigenous people. We have an advisory council that is all Indigenous people, headed up by Tanya Hosch, a very prominent Torres Strait Island woman here in Australia who has been an activist around constitutional recognition, was the Indigenous officer at the Australian Football League for many years, and has led many Indigenous employment programmes in various forums. We do industry-based employment research. I was one of the pioneers, with Professor Jane O'Leary, of Australian industry-based employment research that is very much applied. We pioneered that when we were both at Diversity Council Australia, and now we have applied that in the Indigenous context. We utilise our Indigenous-led research to inform policy, to inform practice, and to inform workplace reform.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Wonderful. Thank you for that introduction and that context. Some people might be listening and thinking, "what has this got to do with learning and development?" and what's this got to do with the wider conversation". I think that the context as an outsider, which I feel I am looking in, is this really, I mention at the beginning that this is the conversation that I have wanted to have since I have arrived in Australia, nearly two

years ago. And I also want to say that I'm probably going to get a lot of this wrong today, because I'm still learning. I don't know enough about the history, I don't know enough about the complexities and the sensitivities. But I do know that I'm here, I'm learning, and I'm inviting everyone else to learn alongside me, because I genuinely believe that diversity, in all of its forms, diversity of place, of thinking, of background, of experience; it makes us all better.

And that's why I wanted to have this conversation on our podcast today. It isn't an unusual conversation in a lot of Australia. And I think for our global audience to understand that context, it isn't something I've heard on a conference stage, apart from very recently when I was at the L&D Symposium, where both Nareen and Josh gave an impressive presentation.

They're going to share some of the statistics and information from that today. That in and of itself is quite an interesting part of the conversation, why aren't we talking about the contribution of Indigenous people within employment? Why is it not just a normalised conversation? As it perhaps may be in my background in the UK.

So, that's why we're here, that's why we have the conversation.

And Josh, I'm curious about your introduction. You mentioned being on country, a phrase I hear as on country, not in country. Help me understand a little bit about that. And your work in agriculture is connected to your work in reconciliation. How does all of that fit together?

Josh Gilbert

I think it connects to the employment narrative really well, actually. I'll start with some context and then explain the on country piece.

Our land here, Worimi country, was gifted to one of the biggest agricultural companies, one that still exists in Australia, two hundred years ago. Upon getting gifted that land, our people worked for rations and like, no rations. There is a line item from 1838, two years after they kind of got given our land, that says they paid a hundred pounds to mob for services rendered with tobacco and maize, which is a seventh of what they paid to feed the horses that year.

So actually the employment experience has always been something that has happened to Indigenous people, rather than through Indigenous people. And us reclaiming that narrative is the very point that we've got to get the narrative back and to have our own conversations, our own self-determined right in the way we describe this stuff, explains the fact that we've got a lot of work, the work to be done.

I'm very fortunate that my family is from here, all my connections are here. This is absolutely where my cultural ties roam. And being on country is part of recognising the fact that it's not just in one place. It's a connection that spans right across this large geographical area. It's the connections to the mountains and the trees and the way in

which we feel safe and embody this country through our actions as well. So that's where the term on country comes from.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Thank you.

Nareen Young

Our country isn't just the dirt in the ground. It's in us, it's in our physical being, and in our emotional and spiritual being. Country to us is the land, the water, the ancestors who created it and have nurtured it for sixty-five thousand years. It is part of our being. And for me, I'm a saltwater blackfella. The saltwater is my place of familiarity, where I feel comfortable and at my best. It's my Ngurra, my place. And I'm not speaking for Josh, but his Worimi country is his Ngurra, his place. It's everything to us. Our country defines us.

Yeah, is that reasonable Josh do you think?

Josh Gilbert

Yeah, it's certainly cemented in our psyche of who we are as people and where we connect, and also, I think, where we resonate with each other as well. When people describe what country they're from, it gives us a visual memory of what that is and the way in which we relate, through country, through places that mean something to us.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Thank you. It's almost something that I can't feel. And I wonder if that's part of the problem. Because I don't feel that. I don't know, I'm just exploring here and learning as I go.

But what I do want to talk about is Gari Yala. You explained this when we were together in the room in the Hunter Valley at the Symposium, and it was revelatory for me to hear the research you shared.

Nareen, can you tell us a little bit about that research and what it has revealed this time around? What even is Gari Yala, and what surprised you, what did it confirm that you already knew?

Nareen Young

Well, for starters, as Josh so well articulated, we have never owned our own employment narrative. So the populist myth is that we're bludgers, we all live on the dole, we don't want to work, we have to have specialist employment programmes because we haven't worked and we don't have the skills. Which is simply not true. And the longer you're here, the more you will hear that, particularly from people like Pauline Hanson and various elements of the conservative hierarchy. And that really goes to the notion that there was no one here and we didn't own this place, there was Terra Nullius, when the British invaders got here.

The land was then, our land was then taken. As Josh has just spoken about, his family's experience, their land was gifted to somebody else. Our land in Sydney was settled and very quickly taken and cleared, and our people very early on faced a smallpox epidemic. Our people were put onto missions and reserves in the Sydney area, including my family, in Camperdown. And children were then taken, especially mixed-race children. My family were at the Randwick Destitute Children's Home. So we were excluded very early on from the employment and labour markets. But our people have gone to every length to be included and to participate wherever and whenever they could.

For example, when Josh is talking about being provided rations instead of pay, that was still prevalent last century in some parts of the country. And of course, these are the things that have meant today, for example, with the prevalence of diabetes in our communities, that is a direct result of being fed flour, sugar, tea and tobacco on the missions instead of being paid wages. There is a lot of intricacy and nuance to that exclusion. There were some places where for example, the railway sector last century, where we began to be included. And on the waterfront, which was largely due to the trade union insisting that our men be included. Our women were removed from families and trained as domestics, servants, but again not paid wages. So, it's a very difficult and nuanced history, which has led to this myth that we haven't participated in the paid economy, that we haven't wanted to work. And it's a very convenient myth for politicians to run.

So we wanted to establish our centre so that we controlled the narrative, that we are very proud of our people's contribution to the development of the modern economy. We understand what that entailed. We still deal with a very deficit-based model. People still refer to Indigenous employment through that lens. I saw a seminar advertised, by people who should know better, last week called Indigenous Employability. So what does that say to you? That only last week there was a seminar being advertised that was about – I don't know, that was saying our people, that Indigenous people need to get their act together and act like they have employability? Is that what that is? That we don't know how to interview, that we don't know how to present ourselves? Even in the most subtle ways, we are painted within the Australian economy as deficit somehow.

So, our aim with our centre is to own that narrative ourselves, to address that, to be about far more than special programmes to put Aboriginal people in jobs, in programmes, in low-skill, low-pay jobs for certain amounts of time that are government-funded. Our work is about deepening the understanding, which some employers do, that we are very capable, very resourceful, very intelligent, very talented people who can make an equal contribution at all levels of the economy.

So where that's board directors, senior managers, line managers, all of the things that everyone else does, and everyone has an expectation that we can do, we want to own that narrative so that's understood.

Michelle Parry-Slater

And where does Gari Yala fit into that, Nareen?

Nareen Young

So Gari Yala, it won't surprise you to know, in context, that until 2020, when we ran the first Gari Yala survey, Indigenous people had never, ever, ever been asked about our employment experiences.

That was a glaring omission that our Indigenous People and Work Hub needed to fix very quickly. So Josh and I put together a survey, but first we put together an expert panel of Indigenous people who came from across the employment industry spectrum, union officials, lawyers, academics, employers.

Where we designed the survey, we led the work, we did the data analysis, and we wrote the report. So, it is Indigenous-run at every level. Gari Yala means speak truth in Wiradjuri language, and we acknowledge Dr Lachlan McDaniel for organising for us to use that language. And it has had a huge impact, because it is so different in the Australian context.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Josh, do you want to tell us a little bit about the report itself? What did you find? And I know you've now run the survey twice, has there been a shift? Has anything changed?

Josh Gilbert

As Nareen pointed out, it's pretty fascinating that it has taken over two hundred years before mob can actually run our own survey that tells our stories of truth about activities and actions that are occurring to them at their workplace and to see where. For me, fundamentally, it was and still remains, a chance for mob to speak truth to the activities and actions that are occurring to them at their workplace, and to see where their experience is taking them.

Some context for your international listeners, Indigenous people in Australia are the most over-researched peoples in the world. Every kind of research question you could probably think of has probably been asked, mostly by non-Indigenous people who have spitballed a theory and then thought they'd go out and test it with Indigenous folk. Which often means that mob don't respond to surveys or don't want to participate in research. It's actually quite common that data sets are quite small because mob have just had enough of that over-research and over-analysis. And therefore mob are not happy to participate.

So, one of the first things that really struck us when we got the responses back from Gari Yala is that we had over a thousand responses to the first survey. That was quite telling. It really spoke to the fact that the way in which we designed the methodology and the way consulted was working, it was mob-led, it was mob-driven. People could see that all the information was going to be told through a positive, proactive lens rather than the terrible lenses that had been happening elsewhere in the environment. There

was a lot of comfort in that and we saw that replicated again in the 2025 survey we did, in the more recent survey of 2025 we had 1,158 respondents to that survey, so its growing by about ten percent, which I think is pretty good for survey data.

Importantly, we had a broad intersectional approach to people who filled in the survey. It's not just Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in Sydney who filled out this survey. We had good representation from across the country, a good mix of gender diversity, mob with disability, what we think is a good spectrum people with a different caring responsibilities of Indigenous people and a broad spectrum of representation and for us that's really important.

And what we've done subsequently with the Gari Yala data set is look at the intersectional approach around how mob with disability, for instance, have a very different experience to mob without disability, and using that intersectional approaches to understand what nuances are needed.

What did we find? Maybe I highlight some of the key things because the report, I think we asked nearly 60 questions, so it was quite a lengthy survey. And also I think a lot of people would say surely people would turn off halfway through? But actually no, people kept filling it out, so despite it being quite a lengthy survey, mob wanted to still make sure their voices were heard.

So, what we found, people wanted to identify at work. Nearly 90% of Indigenous people said it was important for them to identify at work. But what was triggering in response to that was that 60% said their workplace wasn't culturally safe, or only moderately safe. So Indigenous people bring their identity to work, we share who we are as people and our culture, but three out of five times you do that in the workplace, you're going to be met with a very culturally unsafe place to do that. I think that for me is a massive finding.

The other thing we always talk about, by having an expert panel with Gari Yala, we talked originally about asking people about their experience in the employee lifecycle. And our expert panel said no, go and talk about racism.

So, we went out there and made sure that we did that and followed their guidance. And what we find, very similar to the last Gari Yala, is that racism is still common. About 60% of Indigenous people experience racism at work very often, often, or sometimes, which is pretty stark.

And one of the most common things that people hear are racial slurs and jokes at work. By comparing the analysis between the 2020 report and the 2025 report, we estimate based on the rate of change between those two reports, that it would take 118 years before an Indigenous person can go to work and not hear a racial slur. So that's the key findings. That is the experience that mob are having today, there's a lot of other data that sit's underneath that and a lot of other findings, but I think for me that, there the ones that really speak out and a really prominent when we keep going out and asking mob about their experiences, that's the feedback that we keep getting.

Nareen Young:

And the other thing, Michelle, in terms of trust, is that our people are still, in many instances, but always have been, treated as anthropological subjects when it comes to research. We haven't tended to advance still, I sit on the UTS Ethics Committee's Indigenous component, and I still get amazed at the kinds of ethics applications that people make about surveying and researching Indigenous people.

So, there is the element of trust and of course, Jumbunna is a really trusted Indigenous source, and so the response rate is high.

Michelle Parry-Slater

118 years has just shocked me. We have to be able to support speeding that up. We work in learning and development. We generally have access to generally 100% of the audience within an organisation when we work in learning and development. So, let's turn our minds to what we can actually do. What is the opportunity here? I know that your research has come up with ten truths. For example, about Reconciliation Action Plans, which I understand not everyone has, but where they do have them, it does seem to make some difference. But is that white Western press telling me that, or is that actually a truth? What separates a good RAP from a bad RAP? And when you talk about those numbers around racism in workplaces, I'm wondering whether the whole approach of RAPs makes a difference. Because in learning and development we can support culture to shift. Is it worth investigating RAPs at work, or are there other things that ought to happen instead?

Josh Gilbert

I think absolutely RAPs make an impact. We've just released a data cut from Gari Yala which cut the information as to whether organisations have RAPs or don't. There were about even samples, because apparently that makes a massive impact for some of the audiences out there. But around 50% of people who responded to our survey were in organisations with RAPs, 50% didn't. It's not quite that clear-cut, but it's around that, so we're pretty comfortable with the findings. What we found is that those organisations that do have RAPs actually create a much better workplace experience for Indigenous people. They're less likely to be subject to racism, they're less likely to have a cultural load or an unpaid workplace demand placed on them, and they're much more likely to keep turning up to work. So the experience is very different if you have a RAP or not.

Which I think is an important message, that organisations should be investing in those. We also know that the other two things that make a big impact are anti-racism training packages, which you'd think L&D organisations should be doing, but actually most don't. Only 36% of workplaces in Gari Yala said that their workplace actually had an anti-discrimination training package. And the other thing that we know is really impactful is a racism complaints procedure. Only one in three people who responded

to Gari Yala said their organisation had one. And those organisations with RAPs were most likely to have both of those strategies in place. So I think they have been, if an organisation is doing it right and have all the right things, that RAPs ask of them, actually are having a disproportionate positive impact on the Indigenous workplace experience.

Nareen Young

And I think there are two elements to what's working and what's not. First of all, RAPs provide guidance and a framework. So, if you comply with the agreements you've made with Reconciliation Australia in terms of implementing your RAP, then you're going to have a better workplace for Indigenous people. Our stats say that. RAPs are not a silver bullet, but those that do incorporate anti-racism procedures are going to be better for Indigenous people.

But the issue is this, that what's gone on with the HR industry and the L&D industry, whereby the requirements of the Racial Discrimination Act, which has been in place for 50 years this year, aren't being complied with in terms of training.

So, it is actually a matter of compliance that you need to convey the anti-discrimination components that are required in your workplace. You need to convey that to be racist at work is actually unlawful. You do need to convey that you have a complaints procedure and that it's accessible. I don't know what's going with you mob, that these things haven't been dealt with.

But I also think that what RAPs do in an L&D context is unlock all that beautiful cultural learning and knowledge that can be provided about our culture and country and the land that you live and work on. Everybody works and lives on country. I always found it very entertaining when people would say to me that they had to go to Uluru, or go up and mix with Aranda people up in the Territory, to experience the real Aborigines. And you'd just be like, but you live five minutes from Redfern, or you live five minutes from Mount Druitt, or you live in Kempsey. And yet you don't understand that we're just as much the real Aborigines as everybody else. Because I live in the inner city on country. So, it's quite gobsmacking to me I suppose, the lack of exposure and knowledge that most Australians have about this place and our people who nurtured it for them to have this bountiful life, for sixty-five thousand years.

Michelle Parry-Slater

What you've just described is exactly why I was so shocked that we don't have these conversations. To your point about the Racial Discrimination Act, I have a huge interest in compliance training more generally, and for a long time it's been tick-and-flick, just get the box ticked. And I'm really pleased to see that the judiciary is saying that's no longer acceptable. There has been case law, precedential law put in place to say that we need to make sure behaviours change as a result. So, I'm singing from the same hymn sheet with regards to that, I'm sure, because for 50 years to have something in place that's not then recognised or enforced, this is why I've been asking myself, where have I moved? What is this place, how is this like this?

But I don't understand all the intricacies and complexities. I'm not making excuses, but I want to amplify the conversation because it's only by having conversations like this that we get the opportunity to learn more and to know what we can do, which will make a difference. So, that sort of practical guidance for L&D practitioners, yes, you shouldn't just be ticking and flicking when it comes to any compliance, let alone when it's racist compliance you're trying to fight against. What we're really talking about is how we connect these subject matters into the wider strategies, into the systems of organisations, the structures that are inherently different to what they absolutely need to be.

Nareen Young

And that's what we would seek, that RAPs become holistic, business-as-usual mechanisms. And to me, as a long-term diversity practitioner, having led a couple of diversity peaks, First Nations is, in my view and I think anyone would be hard-pressed to argue with it, the Australian diversity fundamental. So, if you begin to get us right, you're going to get a lot more stuff right.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Yeah, a hundred percent. I mean, this is an incredibly diverse country now. I was recently at a ceremony for a friend of mine who's become a citizen, and there were 48 different countries represented in a hall of two hundred people, and yet there is a perception that there is one way of thinking, the white Western way.

Nareen Young

Yeah, but as one of the Socceroos said last week, that's the great thing about this place, the whole world is in one place. And it is, and it's so very cool. But the prevalence of and the thinking of the coloniser is still very much the prism we're within.

Michelle Parry-Slater

A hundred percent. And I can see it as a British person moving here. I can see mindsets that left Britain twenty, thirty, forty years ago and are still here. And that's been both shocking and fascinating to me, and why I wanted to have this conversation. The opportunity, therefore, is ripe for L&D and OD practitioners listening today to say, well, what can we do differently? There's a risk to L&D taking this on without genuine First Nations partnership or leadership. Is there any way you can suggest how we get mob involved? Am I even allowed to use that phrase without causing offence? These kinds of things go through people's minds. So how can someone working in an organisation think, yes, I want to do genuine anti-racist training? What does that look like?

What thoughts?

Josh Gilbert

We always encourage organisations to do an internal audit of what their own Indigenous experiences are. We often work with workplaces, going in and asking a

series of questions through surveys and yarning circles to actually understand what the Indigenous employee experience is within that organisation. For many workplaces, that can be pretty shocking to hear. We present Gari Yala quite frequently, and the common response that leaves with organisations is, that's everyone else, that's not us. And I think the ability for us to go into workplaces and talk with mob and get those voices, and elevate them to leadership, is really powerful. We were doing it recently with quite a big company, and you could just see the mental toll shift happen fundamentally when they were hearing from their own staff and seeing the experience of direct racism within their own workplace, and then realising that they're going to have to do something about it.

So, if you're not aware of it, or you think this is an issue that's happening out there rather than internally, then getting people like us to come in and have a yarn with your Indigenous staff is a really great starting point, it very much flips on its head what that experience actually is. We had one workplace, for instance, that had quite a number of Indigenous staff, none of whom would identify to their managers. So, you can start seeing where these pockets of challenge exist and where the work needs to be done. You need to know what mob you have in your workplace and what their experiences are. And then our work is really to elevate that and share the strategies that we know work, doing all the work highlighted in Gari Yala and saying to workplaces this is what you should do and here is what you should follow.

What I struggle with, with Gari Yala is that when we did the analysis this year, what we found is that the ten truths we presented in 2020 had seen very little change between then and 2025. And what we've done this year is used Reconciliation Australia's truth-telling framework to name this as the first phase. Truth-telling is first. What comes next is truth-listening. And then truth-acting. And that is a real invitation to workplaces and to L&D practitioners, who have got people coming into their workplace and to actually start thinking about what is the truth of that place, how are you listening to it, and then what are you going to do to act upon it? If you're not doing that process, then really listening to your staff, listening to their experiences, and then doing something to change, then I think you are complicit in the way in which mob are experiencing that racism and that workplace culture. And it's a real invitation to say, actually these are the practices that need to change, and this is why.

Michelle Parry-Slater

When I was in the UK after George Floyd was murdered in the US, the response of one of my major clients at that time was exactly what you've just described. The CEO said, I am not equipped to lead a conversation here. I am a white, middle-aged man. And he said what do you need in order to have this conversation? I'm listening. And as a response to that murder, it was very powerful. The employee resource group then had a whole-staff conversation. And people in that conversation who had worked at that organisation for decades, not years, but decades, said that every day they felt they had

to mask at work, because that was the way they got through the day. And that was shocking for people sitting next to them to hear.

And I feel that we're at this kind of inflection point now, do you actually know who you're sitting next to at work? And what would it take for them to actually unmask to you? So does this start with self? Not even with L&D, not even with HR, not even with OD, but each individual listener here today. What is your response to this? Does it feel uncomfortable? If it feels uncomfortable, just ask yourself why is that the case. And it's not necessarily about you feeling comfortable, it's actually living and sitting with that discomfort in order to move the conversation forward.

Nareen, have you got anything to add with regards to guidance for L&D? I mean, this is never going to be a single training intervention. It's never going to be one thing. But to hear that the ten truths haven't shifted, we need to shift them. Come on. I need to help you shift them.

Nareen Young

Well, it's the unlearning. Not even just us, but particularly us. We are just surrounded by negativity and negative images of ourselves and our people our whole lives. So, we have to unlearn and decolonise and heal ourselves. And we do. A really great example of that to me is Indigenous tertiary participation and how that has skyrocketed in the last twenty years. I don't know any Aboriginal families who don't make their kids go to uni these days, very few, unless we have kids who just wouldn't suit it. Everyone I know raises their kids with the expectation that they will go to university. And that is real healing, because that's not a system that has ever welcomed us, ever and it's still not easy.

So if we can heal ourselves and take responsibility for ourselves, in so many ways where we can, acknowledging that the degree of difficulty of the impact of grief and trauma and dislocation is different for every single Indigenous person, and if we can do all this reflection, and talk and think about our place here and what we do and how that impacts all the time, I think everyone else can too.

Those reflections are a personal responsibility. And the responsibility to unlearn and to be part of the healing of this place is everyone's, every individual's, and it's immense.

We work with people of goodwill all the time, every day. And people, you go and report to them, and the shock sometimes irritates me, because I think: where have you been? You walk around this giant country on a daily basis and you've surely heard these jokes thousands of times in your life, that's a bit irritating. But the kind of ashen-faced, no-response reaction at times, it moved me quite recently when Josh and I presented to a rather large company and there was just a whole lot of really senior executives who said nothing. You could tell they were gobsmacked, not shocked, but distressed by what clearly goes on in their organisation. And there was a pocket of defensiveness too, sometimes that from surprising quarters, from offensiveness. But I just think it's

everyone's responsibility. And I would have thought that learning and development professionals could be key.

Because I'm an educator, I was trained as an educator. And I think it's the educator's brain that's curious and reflective. I never get upset when people say they've said the wrong thing. I never do that thing of making someone feel terrible for trying. If you do say the wrong thing, apologise, take it on and move on. I get irritated by the one that goes, I can't do this because I might say the wrong thing. Well, so be it.

Michelle Parry-Slater

But If you don't try....

Nareen Young

So maybe L&D professionals are exactly the right people to move this on, because we're inherently curious and we like learning new things.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Exactly. I genuinely think that there is definitely that curiosity. And you keep mentioning the word reflective, and Josh, you did the same. Reflective practice is where the learning is, as far as I'm concerned. There's a whole chapter in my book on reflection because I think it's really important. A lot of people say, it's because I'm married to a history teacher, we look backwards to go forwards. But knowing more about the history, I think, will help people to feel less...

Nareen Young

I wouldn't rely on that. We've had elders saying to me for thirty years, they're ignorant, once they get educated, they'll be different. And that hasn't changed it. Workplace training, cultural awareness training, hasn't worked.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Okay. So then there's a reflection on what's not worked. That needs to be looked into by the profession. It's no good just saying let's do more anti-racist training if the training's not actually hitting the mark.

Nareen Young

Yeah, in Australia we haven't actually had a culture of anti-racist training. What our training has been is cultural awareness and cultural competence, and it hasn't actually been anti-racist. And so that's what we're trying to push, that change.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Ok.

I'm curious, from that history angle, Josh you've written a book about the history of agriculture in Australia, and I wonder if there's a reflection within looking at that which

can help us look forward, because what has gone before shapes what comes next. What I'm curious about now is what can we do to make things different for the future?

Josh Gilbert

Agriculture doesn't have very many good news stories, that's my summary of what the book has uncovered and what my personal experience is. While it's been a sector that has definitely demanded probably the most of mob from across the country, it was really seen as the sector that was going to drive this new economy. Australia is often quoted as riding on the sheep's back in terms of how our economy was formed. What we do know is that there is very limited conversation and truth-telling happening in agriculture. There are very few organisations, perhaps fewer than five agricultural organisations, that actually have a Reconciliation Action Plan. Very few that are even prepared to lean back into their history and understand what their tales are.

I use this example all the time, but I think it provides the most reality around what that behaviour looks like. The agricultural company that was gifted our land, they celebrated their 200-year anniversary recently. At the same time, they championed 200 years of success at an event and invited the Prime Minister along. Their ASX commentary in their annual report that year mentioned being 200 years old five times. At the same time, a researcher discovered that they were involved in a massacre, actually in many, but they reported on one, and they asked the company about their history and whether they wanted to comment on that. And they very plainly said to the journalist, no, we don't want to talk about our history. So you've got a company that's celebrating two hundred years and saying look how great we are, we've been doing this for such a long time, but wanting to turn a blind eye to anything that isn't good.

And they're aware of these behaviours. I've sent them emails, I've had correspondence with their staff, we've had the conversation. And here we are, on our country, still saying, just come and meet with us and have a yarn. We can't even get the conversation to start. We can't get them to commit resources to flying down here and just having a conversation with our people, at the same time as they'll happily come down and listen to a white historian tell their history at a book launch. So that's the kind of reality that we're dealing with.

And fundamentally for me, and my response to your earlier question, L&D practitioners have the responsibility to fundamentally change how workplaces work. You absolutely have the role to change how you tell not only that history, but what the now is. The Gari Yala stats that we shared before aren't just a historical record. They are what is happening within workplaces today. And that is fundamentally a gap in terms of what training we're providing, how we're providing it, and who's actually responding to it in a fair light. So for me, that's the real invitation, these things have to change.

You need Indigenous people as part of those training packages. We have data, Jobs and Skills Australia recently released a paper that said you need mob at the front of the room teaching people, and that has a better response for mob. And that's absolutely,

fundamentally true. We need mob doing the training and providing the information at the same rate as non-Indigenous people are doing it. If we change all those things and do all the right things, then actually we're going to have a much better workplace and fundamentally change how Indigenous people participate within the system, what opportunities are presented to us. And thinking broader for organisations, your customers and clientele are fundamentally changing to an increasingly Indigenous demographic. About one in fifteen people will be Indigenous by 2050. And that's really going to start questioning how you have relevance with those customers and those staff if you're not doing the fundamentals now.

Michelle Parry-Slater

Look, we need to close. I feel like we could talk about this for hours, but I do need to close us off.

I just want to leave you with one last request. Is there anything you haven't had the opportunity to say today that you would like to say to our global audience of L&D professionals, and our Australian audience as well?

Any final thoughts, Josh?

Josh Gilbert

One of the things that scared me and worried me most at the L&D conference where we recently met is that we have this idea that the AI revolution will fix everything and that it will be the saviour going forward. And I just want to reinforce the fact that if you have garbage going in, you're going to have garbage going out. And if you already have systems that aren't prioritising mob's views and values and learnings, AI is not going to solve that for you. So, actually start doing the grunt work and the groundwork now. Start engaging with mob. Start thinking about what that connection and relationship looks like, particularly through the ten truths of Gari Yala and start having those conversations now, so that you don't end up with a very broken system into the future.

Michelle Parry-Slater

So glad I asked that question, because you're absolutely right. AI has been fed with the white Western view and does not represent the global majority at all. So, thank you for mentioning that. Nareen, any final things that you haven't said today that you would like to say?

Nareen Young

I think what Josh touched on about the increase in the number of Indigenous people in the workforce as our population grows, because we have a lot of babies, and that's a good thing, But I would just say to Australians, and often you get feedback from people who aren't Australian going, my God, what is wrong with that place? Open your hearts, for goodness sake.

The meanness of the national discourse at the moment does most of our heads in, most blackfellas' heads, because we live by the belief, if you don't want to be discriminated against, don't discriminate. So we love seeing all the difference here. We understand that we're a very small part of the population, but diversity and difference and variety are a good thing. And trans people and LGBTQIA+ people have always been a loved and valued part of our communities, until the inquisition of Christianity. We were a diverse landmass until colonisation, where people did Welcome to Country to acknowledge diversity and safe passage when on each other's country. So, think about our ways and we'd have a much nicer place.

Michelle Parry-Slater

I really just want to give my generous and truly heartfelt thanks for this opportunity to have this conversation. I hope that people listening take away from this what has been so generously offered by the pair of you today, to just start thinking differently about all of these subjects, even if they feel uncomfortable, even if they feel like me, I don't really know, so I'm trying to learn. And just the opportunity for us all to live and work more closely together is really the future that I hope this conversation will start to trigger.

So thank you, Josh. Thank you, Nareen.

To anyone who wants to discuss more, I'm going to put into the show notes how you can get hold of both of them, and certainly links to the Gari Yala report and the ten truths as well.

So thank you both very much, and until next time on Learning Uncut we'll leave you with this one to ponder over.

Learning Uncut Elevate Episode 49: Gari Yala - Speak the Truth | Indigenous Employment and the L&D Responsibility | Nareen Young and Josh Gilbert



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