Learning Uncut Episode 100
100: Celebrating 100 episodes: Five Powerful L&D Insights – Michelle Ockers
Hosted by Nigel Paine

Michelle Ockers:
Hi, it's Michelle. Thank you for tuning in to this very special episode of Learning Uncut, our 100th regular fortnightly case study episode. The podcast has been going now for almost four years. The first episode, which I kicked off with Karen Maloney and our then editor, Amanda Ashby, came out on the 12th of June 2018. And here we are, it's the 10th of May as this goes to air. So that means we've had lots of guests who have willingly talked about their work in Learning and Development in their organisations, sometimes with a partner or an external partner, who's been an integral part of that work. Thank you to every one of those guests for being so willing to share their work to talk about what worked, what they learned, maybe what didn't work so well, so that we all collectively get to improve our practice and impact. Thank you also to the listeners who make it worthwhile sharing these stories. We now have listeners from 115 countries around the globe. So thank you for being part of the Learning Uncut community, wherever you are.

In today's episode, because it is a special milestone, a celebration, I've invited Nigel Paine to have a short conversation with me, I let him talk about whatever he was curious about in regard to the podcast. So thank you, Nigel, for being willing to be the host today. And then I've put together a collation of excerpts from different guests around five key themes that I think are important to Learning and Development right now. Some of them are enduring themes, some of them are of increasing importance because of the way the world has shifted in the past few years. So there are themes around learning strategy, one around creating business value, one specifically around data, then live online learning and in particular, how we build connection, build relationships, and safe spaces with live online learning. And finally, communities of practice. There's a lot of interest in social and collaborative learning, so I picked one particular format for building social learning in organisations. I hope you enjoy these themed episodes, and thank you again for being part of the Learning Uncut community

Michelle Ockers:
Hello, Nigel. Thank you for joining me to celebrate this milestone for Learning Uncut episode 100.

Nigel Paine:
It's great. Fantastic. Congratulations. And you know that out of a hundred podcasts, very, very few reach a hundred episodes. Most kind of run out of steam at about episode 10 to 15. So a hundred is epic. Congratulations. And once you've got to a hundred, Michelle, hey, the sky is the limit. I hope I'll be there for the 500th or the thousand.

Michelle Ockers:
I hope so. I hope so too, Nigel. That's a long way away. There's actually 142 episodes. However, I did do some special series during COVID. So I'm just counting what truly is the heartbeat of the podcast, which is the fortnightly episodes, most of which are case studies.

Nigel Paine:
Yes, they are. That's absolutely true. Now so what I want to ask you, if we can kick off is, how do you pick your participants? Because you've got such an incredible range of interesting people. Where do you find them, and how do you balance one against the other to make sure there's contrast and complementarity as well?

Michelle Ockers:

So they come from all sorts of places. A lot of it is through my network or the networks of people I'm connected to. So I'll constantly be asking people, "Have you heard of a good story? Do you know anyone who's doing good work?" Conferences. If I go to a conference or sometimes I'll just have a look at conference agendas, looking for case studies and examples, sometimes I'll go to a webinar or I'll read an article. And I think, “well, that will make an interesting story.” And some of them come from my own connections and people that I've worked with where I picked up on things they're doing.

In terms of getting the balance right, I'm not that fussy, to be honest. I'm only just reaching the point where I'm deliberately looking out for certain themes or going after certain stories to try to fill gaps. So for instance, leadership development. I haven't had a lot on leadership development, so I'm consciously looking out for leadership development at the moment. In the early days and even still sometimes it's more about just the quality of what's coming my way to fill the pipeline because I take great pride in the fact I haven't missed a fortnight.

Nigel Paine:

No, you haven't.

Michelle Ockers:

No. It can sometimes be a bit of a challenge to find a good story. Now, I'm up to a hundred stories, but I'm looking at a list here of 50 people I've approached or have approached me or we've done some initial exploration and I've said or they've said it's not right for what we're trying to do. It doesn't quite fit with the goals. So I always look for something that's had an impact. So it's important that the guests can talk about... "Here's the challenge in the business, or here's how this made a contribution to the business." I'm always looking for their willingness to talk not only about what went well, but what maybe didn't go so well and what we learned along the way. I think that's really critical. And of course, they've got to have organisational approval. So sometimes, people can't get organisational approval, which is a real pity because I think it's a great way to showcase what your organisation's doing well.

Nigel Paine:

Do you cold-call people, or do you rely on being introduced in your own context? If you do cold-call, I think that's a fantastically useful art to be able to persuade people who don't know you and know very little about the podcast to nevertheless to come on.

Michelle Ockers:

I do cold call. Absolutely. But I will try to find someone in my network who can do an introduction because it's easier. So sometimes, I'll read a book, and I'll see something interesting in a book, for example, and I'll just go through LinkedIn. Because one great thing about the L&D profession is people are very open to connecting, to talking about their work. But sometimes, those sort of the door knocking almost doesn't get me through the door, and I don't get the initial conversation. After a couple of attempts, I'll pull back and say, "Well, obviously, they're not interested for whatever reason." But I find LinkedIn super useful as a way of making an approach. And I just let people know – “I've heard this about your work. I'm really interested. Can we have a conversation?” So it's a great way for me to be able to reach out to anyone anywhere in the world working in Learning and Development saying, "Tell me a bit about your work. Can we explore it?"

Nigel Paine:

I think it's a perfect excuse for a conversation. You're absolutely right. It's not, "I'm Michelle Ockers, and I'm quite interested," which is the truth. What you're saying is I've got Learning Uncut, and I really like to invite you to participate. That's a much better way in, isn't it? I agree with you.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. I do get incoming as well. So I get people coming to me to say... And sometimes the ones I love are, "I'm a Learning and Development professional. I've done this piece of work. Maybe it would make a good story." And I'm just so thankful when people have the confidence to do that. And people sometimes don't see the value of what they've done. It doesn't need to be cutting edge. It doesn't have to be about the latest technology. It can be something more traditional, something we've been doing a long time that's done really well. I do get approaches from book authors and speakers/thought leaders. But I always go back and say, "You need to bring me a case study and be willing to come on with someone from the organisation." And that weeds out a lot of that noise. It's not that style of podcast. It's about real-world professionals doing things in L&D.

Nigel Paine:

Yes. Because you get all the PR people who say, "Oh, this would be good for my client." And that gives tick on the box.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Nigel Paine:

That's not really what you're after. So let me just ask the final question. And that is, we've just created a little bit of content. What is its journey now from where we are speaking today to being part of the hundredth Learning Uncut Podcast? How does it go from here?

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So there's normally... This is a little bit different in that you and I, Nigel, haven't had a preparation conversation. So normally, what I'll do, if I can just take one step back. Once I've kind of spotted a good story or potential story is arranged a conversation with the guest. And we'll just spend 30 minutes talking about the story. I want to get to the heart of why this story matters and screen the story a little bit, the quality of the story. But I also ask the guest, "What do you most want people to know, to understand, to feel, to take out? Like, what do you really want to bring out? And of course, is there anything that we can't talk about or shouldn't talk about?" I always aim to make sure that the guests and the organisation look great even if they were in a tough spot or things weren't going well before they started the piece of work. It's never, "Oh, things were a mess." It's always, "We really wanted to do this even better." So that's sort of part of it.

So we do the prep session. Then I do up sort of... I kind of think about the flow. There's a basic flow of each of the conversations. If anyone's listened to them, you'll see the flow from kind of big picture strategy. Why was this important? What did you do? How did you do it? What was the impact? What'd you learn? But I'll do up some talking points and share that with the guest. We do the recording. So you and I are recording today.

And then from there, I draft up some show notes with the help of Natalie DeBon Govic who's on my team, my podcast producer. And she'll do some of the work on the show notes now. I'll do some of the work. We'll look around for some resources to curate to support the story. Sometimes, they come from the guest at themselves. Sometimes, I do a bit more research around the context. So maybe they've done something really good with nudge-learning as an example. So it's like, "Well, what's the learning science that supports that? Is there a good article out there on the learning science that supports that if someone wants to dig deeper?" So we'll pull together some resources for the show notes. I'll look for a couple of good quotes because we do quite a bit with social media. So I'll draft some quotes based on the content of the episode, email the guests, thank them. Tell them here's the resources. Here's the quotes. Are you happy with the quotes?

Then Natalie swings into action on the production side. She sends a file with a transcript off to Dave, our editor. Dave, from Author to Audio, Dave Stokes, who does a great job. We do provide a transcript. Sometimes there's some editing. So mark up the transcript, send it off to Dave for editing.

I have someone I work with now on the social media posts. I used to draft all of the social media posts myself. There's about 30 per episode - tweets and LinkedIn and Instagram. But now I've got someone who does those. Natalie pulls it all together. Loads it all up to a platform called Libsyn, loads it up to our website. And then make sure everything goes out smoothly on the day. So there's kind of a bit of a production line behind it.

Nigel Paine:

There it is. And what is the time scale? So today, we are speaking. How many days before it sees the light of day, generally?

Michelle Ockers:

So for this particular episode, it's just under two weeks. Two weeks is comfortable. I have done them in as little as two days, Nigel, from recording...

Nigel Paine:

Wow.

Michelle Ockers:

... to publication if I need to, if I run tight of time.

Nigel Paine:

That's like 24 hours a day working in order to get it ready. That's amazing. It's complicated.

Michelle Ockers:

It does. And for my personal effort, it's probably up to four hours an episode for my effort because I do put a lot of thought into to it as well. And then obviously, there's expenses with paying for support and paying for a good quality transcript, which I think is really important, the transcripts. But you know what? It's just an awesome library of stories about all sorts of different approaches to learning from the people who made them happen. I love that I've got this library to share with the world.

Nigel Paine:

I agree. And the world is getting more and more engaged with it as well because I think every new person is also someone who will go back to the library from time to time. So you end up with a kind of community rather than just individual listeners. And that's an amazing achievement. And, again, you should be congratulated, Michelle, not just for a hundredth episode, but the whole thoughtful process that goes into each one that you produce, which I hope people have now got a kind of clearer idea of how it all works.

Michelle Ockers:

Thanks, Nigel. And I just want to say to all of the guests who've made the whole thing possible, thank you for your generosity. People have been so willing to come on and talk about their work. And I get great feedback in terms of the value of reflecting on their work and them learning from that as a reflective exercise as well. So if anyone is out there thinking maybe I should talk to Michelle about a potential story or if you know someone else's work that you spot that you think this might make a good story, don't be shy in getting in touch with me through LinkedIn.

Nigel Paine:

There's an invitation. There's an invitation. Thanks a lot, Michelle. Good to talk to you.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. Thanks so much, Nigel.

Nigel Paine:

It's a pleasure.

Learning Strategy

Michelle Ockers:

Learning Uncut has showcased some excellent examples of well-crafted organisational learning strategies, which is an overarching approach to learning in an organisation rather than the design of a specific solution. Let's look at two key characteristics of effective learning strategy. The first is about alignment with the broader organisational culture. In episode 56, Kristina Tsiriotakis described how she explored the culture at DECIEM as a start point to shaping their learning strategy.

Kristina Tsiriotakis:

I think the first thing was really observing and reflecting. I even kept a diary actually, on what the cultural experience was. I had no documents. I couldn't read about the company strategy anywhere. I couldn't read about the values anywhere. I kept hearing, "That's so DECIEM." Or "That's not DECIEM." But I didn't know what that meant. So, there was a lot of observation. All the typical stuff of needs assessment, the surveys, the interviews, the on-the-job observation, the cognitive walkthroughs, the review of resources and artifacts, if they existed, or the noting of the fact they didn't exist.

And there were themes of self-direction, of autonomy, of inclusivity, of co-construction or co-creation, of people-centric, of a family-oriented feeling. And these were all of the words that really started to form and shape the approach that I wanted to take to learning, which was something that was completely choice-based, had enough structure to guide people, but the autonomy that held true to the culture of DECIEM, that was completely collaborative and co-created, that wasn't about hierarchy, but where everybody could be both a learner and a teacher, that was just in time so that people could learn as needed, in the flow of work.

Michelle Ockers:

My episode 64 conversation with Katrina Moss also highlighted the importance of alignment with organisational culture. Here she talks about the deliberate adoption of growth mindset at Shopify.

Katrina Moss:

So, one of the first things was to look at culture and how we talk about culture. One of the big indicators of how to be successful at Shopify is our cultural values. And the beautiful thing about how we come up with our values is we have to see it living first. We don't see aspirational things, it's that we are able to see people being successful and thriving in our environment, and then extracting the behaviours that they have that demonstrates that.

So, we were able to identify that this is a behaviour that leads to being successful. So, we were able to come up with the value of be a constant learner. And what I was really excited about with that value being named was not just how powerful it was to say, "Be a constant learner," but the under text of that and the description of that value had really wonderful things like, be ever curious and more interested in what you don't know than what you do. So, that's where I started was with the culture values, knowing that once it was something that we spoke about really deliberately, then it becomes even more of a norm throughout the organisation.

Michelle Ockers:

One way in which many learning strategies fall down is to overemphasise content, based on the false assumption that learning is happening because people are consuming content. My next two guests outline a more effective blend of learning approaches. Let's hear again from Kristina Tsiriotakis, and then from Gareth Killeen, describing the Reece blend in episode 58.

Kristina Tsiriotakis:

The letter C just kept emerging, but I started to notice that I had my one C, and then another C, and a third C, and those three things were, I wanted to use the LXP to really reimagine what the content experience would be in our organisation. And again, I'd come from a model that was really about in-house content creation, that was quite timely. Mostly e-learning, sometimes classroom-based learning, sometimes print resources, but all really disparate experiences again.

And on top of that, it was all pushed out by the learning designers and I just thought, "But everybody's a learning designer. Everybody has stories to share and content to contribute. So, how can we use this platform to really reimagine the content experience?" Alongside that, and I'll dive deep in a moment, but I realized with the LXP we had a huge opportunity to bridge the gap between content and communications and to bring comms into the content world. And then the third piece was, how do we bring in a strong sense of community engagement by really getting the learner involved and co-creating the experience? And making them content creators and community champions and teachers ultimately, was the goal.

Gareth Killeen:

Content delivery is only 25% of our strategy. So, one of the things I say to my teams over and over again is, "If your content doesn't cause reflection, doesn't cause conversation, doesn't cause contextualization to happen, then it's not learning, it's just content." So, all we want to do by saying it's 25% is just set people up enough so that they can do their own explorations, they can engage in their own conversations, and they can work out how to bring it into their real work life.

So, for instance, one of our mindsets is collaborate. So, what a learning experience for that month looked like through our blend, for instance, would be, well, your first few weeks are set up with some content where we tell stories, it's normal learning. You're engaging with content that helps you understand what great looks like in practice. So, you'll move through that content phase into what we would call an explore, which is the next part of our blend. And explore is a whole learn to learn kind of thing, but an explore and collaborate month looked something like, the LXP will challenge you that week to say, "Based on everything you've learned so far about collaborate, observe your team for the next week and note down the practices and habits they have that may help or hinder their collaboration."

And you'll move from that then into the next part of our blend, which is practice. So, now you're being challenged to think about how you might actually make a change based on what you're learning. So, the LXP might challenge you for that week or say, "Right, over the next week," and this'll be quite checklist orientated, "get your team together." Tick. "Share with them the results of your last week observation, so what you were doing and what you noticed about them." Tick. And then, "Brainstorm one way that you as a team can improve how you collaborate together." And then that'll move you into the fourth part of our blend, which for the leadership stuff was a coach. And the power of coaching in Reece is something that's very real and valid.

Michelle Ockers:

Having a well-crafted, evidence-informed learning strategy that has strong stakeholder buy-in is a critical step towards ensuring that learning helps your organisation and its people to thrive. While there's a lot more to it than we can cover in this segment, you'd be wise to follow the example shared by our Learning Uncut guests, to ensure alignment with your organisation's culture and deliberately shape an effective blend of learning approaches.

Business Value

Michelle Ockers:

One important aspect I look for in Learning Uncut stories is that the learning solution or approach featured has had a business impact. That learning has been linked tangibly to business outcomes. Yet, many in L&D find this challenging. This selection from Learning Uncut guests highlights the power of thinking business first and several ways we can spot opportunities to create business impact. First up, Laura Overton will lay the foundations of what it means to think business first.

Laura Overton:

We want to be seen as providing great business value but tend to trip ourselves up. So, that was really behind why I thought maybe we need to be a little bit clearer about the language we're using and how we see our value. Well, basically the value spectrum is about how we articulate the value that we bring to the organisation. And it's really divided into two areas, to the left of the spectrum is the concept about learning value, and to the right of the spectrum is the concept of business value. And the whole idea is that when we operate from a business value first perspective, then it improves our relationships with the organisation, it improves how we see other solutions that we provide for the organisation.

And yet typically, we are operating from a learning value perspective. And in the learning value perspective part of this spectrum is whole areas around our activities. So, how useful do people think we are? But all of those things, activity, efficiency, engagement, usefulness, is all taken from our perspective as a learning professional, what we create for you, do you think it's valuable? And when we track our learning value from that perspective, then we're really caught up in our own cycle.

Whereas, on the other end of the spectrum, we have business value. This is defining our value in things that are important to the business. So, in terms of performance, things like the speed to adoption, of the impact we have on business key performance indicators, the impact we're having on helping people perform critical tasks, are also business value in terms of the way our organisation's looking at culture, is looking at purpose, is looking at innovation, agility. These are the sorts of things that our business is talking about. And when we define our value on the business end of the spectrum, then it basically allows us to be able to connect and communicate in a more powerful way.

Michelle Ockers:

Assuming we've got our thinking clear about business value, how have some of our guests spotted opportunities to create business value? One way is to use business data, an approach the Cotton On Group embraced under Beth Hall's leadership. Here's how Beth described it in episode 33, illustrated with just a couple of examples from their different academies.

Beth Hall:

We don't care for learning data. And the reason being is that we care about, so what? What's the performance? And when I first joined the group, I was having a conversation with one of our leaders, and I was saying, "Oh, we've this completed and we've had this many people at workshops." And I'm giving him all of these metrics and proof points that, "Hey, we're doing a great job." And he said, "Well, I'm not seeing it out in stores and I'm not seeing this, and I'm not seeing that." And he's very much a case of, "So what, Beth? If you can't show me what the output looks like in terms of performance, then what's the point in this conversation?"

When we think about our leadership academy, we know that our leadership academy is delivering to the business when we have ready leaders for internal succession. So, we look at our internal succession rate and how many times we have to hire outside of the organisation for our leadership roles, to tell us whether we're growing our own leadership talent or not. And we also look at our engagement results across the business.

So, a lot of engagement is who I work for. So, if we have amazing leaders that create awesome cultures for our people to perform, then our engagement results will reflect that. When we look at things like our retail academy, the business metrics will be looking at is things like average spend. So, are they helping our customers to buy? We also look at our net promoter score. So, are customers having a great experience with us and are they promoting us to their friends and family? Because if they are, that means that we're delivering great service, and we're delivering great service because our team members are skilled to be able to support the customer. So, everything we do has to tie back to some form of business success measure, otherwise we challenge ourselves and you need to go, "Well, why are we doing this?" So, we're just talking to ourselves, "Is it just something that we want to do, or is it actually solving a business problem?"

Michelle Ockers:

One of the most powerful uses of data is to have smarter business conversations. In episode 90, Gill McEwen from Blackmores Academy discussed how they speak with their customers in what she calls banner groups across the pharmaceutical industry, to understand what business success would look like before they run education programs.

Gill McEwen:

It also helped us set metrics. There's nothing better than having a conversation with a banner group customer, where they want education, but you've really got to turn that into, "Well, what do you want to achieve out of this opportunity? Is it a 5% lift, a 10% lift in sales?" As an example. "Do you want to measure the confidence? Is it NPS?" So, we are very much about designing for data, designing to get the analytics out of the data, looking for new ways and partnering with people that are going to help us be able to drill into that data and tell more about our learners, but also share the success around what we've created for the learners and what they can do.

It's probably only the last year or so that the pharmacy banner groups are getting more sophisticated in the way that they can pull up the data from their individual stores. So, that's what's starting to give us a lot more opportunities to set up case studies with them, so that we can work together on the education piece that we're delivering. So, those shared KPIs and measures, and really understanding from the get-go, what is it that we're setting out to achieve?

Michelle Ockers:

The final approach to figuring out where and how to create business value is to do something that Trish Uhl described in episode 48, as going to Gemba, physically going to the workplace. After Trish explains why this matters, Damien Woods describes an example of how he did this in a bank, taken from episode 38.

Trish Uhl:

One of the early business cases in the assessment process was going to the Gemba, which is the whole concept of going to where the work happens, right? How could we help put a strategy together on how people were going to work differently and change their ways of working, if we didn't understand their current state of how they work?

And you can't understand somebody's current state of how they work, unless you're with them in their environment, because when you take people out of their environment, you take them out of context. And when you take them out of context, there are things that they don't even think about to tell you.

Damien Woods:

I also love the opportunity to go into different parts of the business and learn how they do what they do, because it always gives me a little bit of food for thought about what it is that we can do in the learning function to help them and what might be difference or nuanced in their environment. And what I saw in the direct call centre environment was, it was a hive of activity. I sat with the headphones on and listened to conversations just to get a sense of what their work was like.

And then I talked a little bit to the GM running the department about, "Well, how do you get your people in and then up to speed really quickly?" And one of the things I said to the GM was, "I think that if we could accelerate the learning process, maybe people would stay longer and we could have an impact on the attrition rates." And I also thought we could probably accelerate the speed to proficiency, but we also said, "Look, you've got hard metrics that you track here, so we want to be measured against impacting those as well."

Michelle Ockers:

In summary, to create business value, set up on the right foot by thinking business first, use business data, have smarter business conversations upfront, and go to Gemba, observe work being done in the workplace.

Data for L&D

Michelle Ockers:

Using data effectively is an opportunity to better understand business needs, track and support learner progress and behaviour change, improve workplace application and increase business impact. While L&D professionals are generally interested in using data more effectively, it can feel daunting with numerous challenges to address. What can we learn from Learning Uncut guests who have gone deep into the use of data? The first example comes from Network Rail, who operate the British rail network infrastructure. In episode 84, Guy Wilmshurst-Smith explained how he was challenged by a senior manager to tell him what training his team actually needed, rather than asking what they wanted.

Guy Wilmshurst-Smith:

One important part of the conversation was that the managing director in question said, "Look, frankly, I run a multi-billion-pound business, training is measured in the millions. If you can solve this problem, there will be unlimited training budgets. It's not the size of the training budget that matters, it's the operational performance of the network that matters." And it was that key that really stepped us into digging in, forgetting all of our own performance metrics, and looking at the business' own performance metrics about how that managing director was measured. Taking a good deep look and looking at all the things like, as you would imagine on a train service, train delay minutes, and how many minutes is each train delayed or not delayed each day, and where are those delays occurring in the maintenance teams? Where is the backlog of work? And so on.

How many external contractors are they employing? Because they're short of the skills required. This whole series of things are measurable. In fact, the railway is full of data. And so, we started to look at it and what we decided to do was to try and find areas where we could demonstrate a link between the delay minutes on a train and the training that we provided. And we knew that it wouldn't be a direct link, but there had to be some way of us gradually building up a series of steppingstones to go from one to the other.

And we looked across the network therefore, for areas of extreme problems, where bits of the infrastructure seemed to have very high levels of unreliability. And we eventually came to a set of points just north of Brighton. Now, points are those parts of the rail infrastructure which switch trains from one track to the next, swivel the two across. And what we then were able to do was to, having articulated that that set of points equalled that amount of competence in that particular team, we then started to expand that deduction outwards by gradually building across all the sets of points. Then every other piece of infrastructure, linking faults which causes delay minutes, areas that caused a backlog of work, to a competence.

We then measured the gap in competence within the teams and would then produce a training plan within the data system that we built as a result of the experiments that we'd been carrying out. So, what we did was bring in a consultant to help us with the technology, because it is not a technology, using all the data stuff, was not our core expertise. And we worked together with them to then build up what then became called the dynamic demand planning tool.

Michelle Ockers:

I encourage you to listen to the whole of episode 84, even if your business operates in a very different industry to Network Rail, there are valuable lessons that Guy shares about working with business data that make this an important case study for all L&D professionals. Here are his key tips.

Guy Wilmshurst-Smith:

My biggest tip is try not to grow any new data yourself. The data that you use must be the business's own data. And that may seem an obvious thing, but quite often when you start to look at the business data, you'll realize that you often analyse it better than they do and you realize there's a whole pile of flaws in that data. And your first temptation is to try and clean it up and then use a clean set of data for your work.

But of course, their data is constantly changing and you start to build yourself a whole pile of work if you're always trying to use clean data. I think that you have to have a bit of faith in this, the results for this do not come immediately. And you have to sell this to your business in such a way that they realize that it's an investment. I think that is never an easy thing, depending on the time horizons that your business has got. So, it's a difficult struggle in that sense, but it's worth doing.

Michelle Ockers:

Our second example comes from Mars. In episode 48, Trish Uhl and Rachel Horwitz showcased their work, supporting the introduction of a new traceability process into the food supply chain. Traceability makes it possible to track produce from point of origin of ingredients all the way through processing and distribution to retail locations, where the products are purchased. Trish describes how operational data was used to target learning interventions and get feedback on what was happening in the workplace, so that they could improve learning and performance support. A test and iterate approach.

Trish Uhl:

So much of a signature of digital transformation regardless of your organisation or the type of industry or sector that it's in, is we're now finding that it's not just the tangible that's moving through supply chain or moving through our organisation as an output, but it's the information, it's the data flows as well. And it has everything to do with fast response.

Just to help people that are listening to this, that aren't in this particular environment and aren't working on a project like traceability, but at the end of the day, we're talking about very common business productivity technologies that were being implemented. So, we're talking about an ERP system. We're talking about your run-of-the-mill Microsoft Office products and some other types of tools and technologies being implemented as well. But ultimately, what's currently available in this world today is the ability to be able to sample and analyse data from those operational environments.

So, if you're looking at, again, what's going to signal progress of going down the field towards that goal, of being able to score that touchdown is, are people in the systems, are they entering information correctly? Is it complete? Is it accurate? We can actually now use tools like Power BI or Tableau, in order to tap into those integrated, unified data sets, to be able to draw that information back.

So, if we did this thing upstream, whether it was information or it was instruction, or it was motivation, through manager engagement or some other change management initiative, or through story, we used an awful lot of storytelling. Can you actually see the impact of what you did upstream, actually flow through and have that downstream effect? And if you're not seeing the downstream effect, if you're not seeing that progress down the field towards scoring that goal, then where are the flags on the field? Where do we need to do a diagnostic? Where are those points of failures being triggered? How do we get more information about what's happening there? And then, how do we address, how do we target our time, our attention and our resources, which are limited, like everybody else's, in order to be able to address specifically wherever those potential points of failure or actual points of failure are?

Michelle Ockers:

The final guest who may shift your thinking on how to work with data is Josh Humphries, who has been on the podcast twice. We heard from him in episode 36, alongside Clay Shearan from Woolworths Group. Then when we ran the Learning Uncut Elevate series, Josh joined us in Elevate 15 to discuss the idea of data in the flow of learning. Here is his overview of what this means.

Josh Humphries:

Essentially, we're building on that concept of learning in the flow of work, which set out to get us as L&D professionals to reframe what we do to integrated performance support. And data in the flow of learning seeks to do essentially the same thing and redefine the L&D professionals' relationship with data.

At the moment, it seems that data has been all about tracking and evaluation and something that is done at the end of learning or something that you go back and see what your LMS has tracked and figure out what to do with it. With data in the flow of learning, what we're asking people to do is be a lot more deliberate about how they design data into the learning experience and then put data essentially at the core of their learning design practice.

Michelle Ockers:

Josh identifies five ways that L&D can use data in the flow of learning, all of which you can hear about in Elevate 15. For now, listen to Josh who speaks first, and Clay, discuss the use of data to support action planning and manager dashboards in the leadership development program at Woolworths.

Josh Humphries:

We were able to actually get that embedding by immediately asking them after the event, what they were going to do, and capture that in data and gave it back to their manager so that it could be put back into the operational rhythm of the organisation to make sure it was executed. The manager can see each of their people's actions, and they were actually asked to confirm that action as something that the person should do. So, we put a little button on the dashboard that said, "Yes, go ahead and do this."

And then the learner could see ... We could see what they had said they were going to do, to make sure that they kept it front of mind. And then, we also rolled it up throughout the organisation so that sponsors could also see how many actions had been completed, they could see what the overall capability gaps before and after were.

Clay Shearan:

We walked away from this eight-week program with actionable and tangible things that our team could go and do. What it enabled us to do is help the manager really hone in on what their team need help with. And put that back in to, like I mentioned before, the operational rhythm that happens in stores.

Michelle Ockers:

I'll let Josh close this segment on the use of data, with his biggest tip for getting started using data more effectively as part of learning solutions.

Josh Humphries:

When people come to me and say, "How do I put X API into my organisation?" I'm like, "Well, I don't really know what that means." You got to have a problem you're trying to solve and then use data to solve that problem, as opposed to, I think we hear data around and it's like, "Oh, I need data." Do you? What do you want it for? Using data isn't about FOMO, it is about solving a problem.

Live Online Learning

Michelle Ockers:

The pandemic forced widespread use of live online learning. Improved capability in designing and facilitating live online will be one of the enduring legacies of the pandemic. One aspect that was discussed a lot by Learning Uncut guests in this period is how to build relationships and connection with and between participants as an element of a positive learning environment. Cheryle Walker, my guest in Elevate episode 11, is a pioneer in this space and guided many L&D professionals through the transition to live online learning. Here's how she describes live online and introduces empathy objects.

Cheryle Walker:

It's asynchronous - some people use the terminology synchronous and asynchronous. We all get together at the same time, no matter what time zone we're in, no matter what location we're in globally. And it's very much in my mind, a collaborative form of learning, a constructing and sharing of knowledge.

I have created what I've termed empathy objects. So, the idea of social objects comes from the Web 2.0 world. I've borrowed from social objects and I call them empathy objects in the live online environment. So, some of them are things like doing introductions well, not just assuming people know each other in the room. Taking the time to, whether you allow each person to speak, to introduce, or you use chat panel or breakout rooms and other creative ways, making sure the introductions are done and not overlooked, because you've got a short amount of time live online.

One of the other ones that's really important too, is acknowledgements. What do we need to acknowledge as a human group before we get down to business? So, that might be an acknowledgement to country in Australia. It might be other cultural, significant greetings in other cultures or parts of the globe, or it may be simply acknowledging our shared challenges at the moment. It could be something that's organisationally sensitive, like a restructure. So, what are those things that we need to acknowledge rather than ignore, before we get down to business and that can help with people's focus and help people feel a sense of togetherness and empathy for each other?

Mentimeter is a good way to gather ... And there's things like word clouds, are really good. So, I use a question like, "How are you coping with learning and working in this new remote environment?" Or something like that. And get people to enter three words and we create a word cloud. And once again, it just creates that sense of shared struggle, shared challenge, shared celebration even, and it gives the participants an opportunity to cast their eyes around the room, not physically, but metaphorically, and see what other words are coming up for people and acknowledge all of that. And really valuable for a facilitator to get inside the heads of your participants very early in the session as to what's bubbling in there at the moment.

Michelle Ockers:

Building empathy helps create a safe environment. In episode 96, we heard about a program run by Oceanian Football, which aims to attract more women into roles in football and grow the game for women. Here, Emma Evans from Oceania Football describes the importance of a safe environment.

Emma Evans:

I think the first thing was trying to develop, well, not develop, but get people to realize what they had to offer, and it was developing that self-confidence and getting them to know their why as well, what did they want to contribute? And sometimes I think you don't know, you know you have something to offer, but you don't know what exactly that is. And by gaining more confidence in themselves and their own ability and connecting with others around them, I think slowly they start to open up, they start to share stories, they start to realize what other opportunities there are for themselves.

Michelle Ockers:

Facilitator, Annie Kennedy, talks about approaches she used to create a safe environment.

Annie Kennedy:

Throughout the three-day program that these Women Development Officers will be running, they're also putting these women into peer learning groups. So, they're getting a deeper dive, higher trust, to connect and build relationship, but also support each other, and hopefully beyond the three days to support each other with the projects that they're going to be going out and putting together.

We did lots of breakout groups and the Zooms for them to start to share, and me traveling around quickly trying to see where people are at. Traveling around the breakout groups within the Zoom is ... They blew me away how intimate they became very quickly. And then, just beyond that into the peer learning group scenario where they're running it themselves, between the workshops, in an informal way, they were able to build on that. And what started to surface was natural leaders. And so, we started to notice ... Because at the same time I was coaching on a one-on-one with the participants of the program, so I got a deeper connection and relationship and understanding where they're at.

Michelle Ockers:

Annie has just touched on one of the big opportunities presented in online learning environments, which is to facilitate connections beyond live sessions. Cheryle Walker has other suggestions for how to achieve this.

Cheryle Walker:

Extend your ability to set up or set things in motion while you've got them live online, that you can then check in throughout the learning journey. So, that might be as simple as pairing people up as accountability buddies. And these things are not new to learning programs, they're just things I think we forget, because once again, we get corralled by the start and the finish of the live online session. We get squished in that space and we don't think beyond that space.

So, I encourage facilitators to find ways of motivating, inspiring, and getting those connections, going outside of the live online session. I mean, other ways are things like getting them to complete a task and bring that back for presentation at the next session.

Michelle Ockers:

Earlier, Cheryle introduced the idea of empathy objects, including acknowledgements before you get down to business. Annie handed opening and closing sessions over to the group.

Annie Kennedy:

The woman opening would share that responsibility, how they chose to open, it would usually be a prayer and closing with a prayer. And I have to say, Emma and I both agree, our favourite part of the Zooms is the end, because they suddenly burst into life and there's this delightful ... Where they have to say goodbye to each person before they get off the call.

Michelle Ockers:

In episode 65, Dr. Kuva Jacobs shared other examples of powerful opening and closing rituals. This story was about designing a contact strategy for a bank in the Philippines, in a way that lifted the design thinking capability of project participants.

Dr Kuva Jacobs:

One of the first things that we did each day was we had some important daily rituals. So, for me, I have this thing about making the first minutes of a Zoom meeting or a virtual meeting really count, so that when you join there's no awkward silence. So, we set up, the initial board had a warmup activity, so where they would share something personal. So, each day it was something different, like their favourite food, a photo of their local area, because we were all from all over the place. So, we had all sorts of different things that we would do each day with them. And that also made us have a bit more of a human connection with them as well. We couldn't see them, we only had sound, we didn't have visual, which made it really hard to build that human connection. So, we had to be quite creative in the way that we did it.

At the end of each session, we ran what we call daily reflections. And in the daily reflections we had four parts and this was on Miro. So, the four parts were, what did they learn? What was their biggest challenge? What were they grateful for? And what had they achieved that day? And in doing that activity, it was a group activity, and we also, all of the facilitators who were involved, were doing it as well. And it became a really beautiful team activity that allowed us to capture feedback in a positive way and it also helped us to refine the sessions for the next day, as well.

Michelle Ockers:

As COVID restrictions ease, we can now be more deliberate about when to use physical learning spaces. We now know that with thoughtful design and facilitation, we can create safety and connection live online. In episode 60, Chemene Sinson described how she worked through the adaptation from facilitating in physical online spaces.

Chemene Sinson:

For me, the big focus of facilitating online wasn't so much on what I had to adapt and change, but it was on what I needed to make sure that however I adapted and changed, that I was keeping, that you get from face-to-face, and to make sure that in any learning context, for example, people need to feel safe in the environment, if they're going to speak up and genuinely share what's going on for them and share their challenges, and fail productively when they make mistakes, and know that's an important part of learning and that's okay.

When I think about ways to help people stay anonymous, so if they wanted to come and have a private word with me about something, if they needed to in the face-to-face, that's easy, they just come up and have a word. So, I thought, "Well, in the virtual environment, I can invite a private message." Or, on one occasion when it was a different platform with a different client that didn't have a chat function, I just said, "Look, here's my mobile. Here's my number. And send me a private text if there's something you need to tell me that you don't feel comfortable sharing."

Michelle Ockers:

I hope that this collation of examples of how we can build safety, empathy, and connection live online, motivates you to continue improving your design and facilitation practice. I also trust that it helps you to make well-considered choices in the future about when to use online or physical spaces.

I'd like to close with Dr. Cathryn Lloyd on why it matters to create a safe space and support people to build relationships in order to learn more effectively. Interestingly, while she was speaking about the online context, the following extract doesn't mention this specifically, and she could really be discussing why this matters in any learning space.

Dr Cathryn Lloyd:

I put a huge emphasis on building relationships and I endeavour to create a community of learners, and also too, to recognize that it's not about me, it's actually, yes, I'm there, helping to guide and facilitate and what have you, but at the end of the day, it's the wisdom of the group and the people who are arriving to those courses, they've got all sorts of experiences and knowledge and what have you. So, the more that we can work with people to bring those experiences to the fore, are so rich and valuable. And that's what really creates a fantastic learning experience for everybody.

And I think you can do that online with the smaller numbers, absolutely, and create that sense of the group wisdom coming through. And that's something that I've really enjoyed myself and valued, but you have to come back to the fact that there is a human being who is going to experience that. So, how do we actually help create an experience that is a human-centred experience, that that person feels valued, that they do feel safe to try things, experiment, fail, whatever it is, because the environment allows for that?

Communities of Practice

Michelle Ockers:

Over the past two years there has been a resurgence of interest in social learning, perhaps due to the shift to remote working, normalising connecting with others in online settings and increased familiarity with a range of collaboration tools. Several Learning Uncut stories have featured the strategic use of communities of practice to connect people across an organisation to share knowledge, learn together and improve practice.

The first example is one that I was involved with at Coca-Cola Amatil, which I discussed in episode 67 with Helen Blunden, who worked on the initiative with me. Our National Engineering Manager was concerned about the approaching retirement of a long tenured engineer and wanted to capture his knowledge by creating courses and resources. I felt that this was a symptom of a bigger issue and that knowledge sharing may be a better approach.

Here are extracts from my podcast conversation with Helen, about what we discovered through a series of site visits, and how we equipped the engineering staff to participate in a community of practice.

Michelle Ockers:

We found that their networks, with the exception of maybe one or two people at each site who did have relationships with people at other sites, because they'd been on a training course together at some point in time-

Helen Blunden:

That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

... or they'd had some sort of contact, most people were only connected and communicating with people who worked at their own site.

Helen Blunden:

It's not about learning, it's about the work that people are doing, because that's what they understand. And so, the use cases came out, obviously the use cases have to relate back to the business strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

Troubleshooting-

Helen Blunden:

That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

... problems on equipment that they were having difficulty figuring out what to do about, sometimes-

Helen Blunden:

That's right.

Michelle Ockers:

That was an example of a use case. Process improvements and sharing process improvements was another use case. So, coming out of the analysis, one of the recommendations was we should set up a community of practice and there was another recommendation, Helen, around how we launched the community of practice and engaged people in the community of practice through what we call the Work, Connect, and Learn Program.

Helen Blunden:

The whole idea was creating, I guess, a blended learning program over a period of, I think it was five or six weeks. It was five modules and each module was meant to step a person through helping them build a network and helping them interact and engage in a community of practice. The last module was all about application and context. So, now we wanted to have them share some kind of problem that they were having, so that they could share that problem and then identify some solutions. And so yeah, the last module was all about, what are your top three pain points? And that was then interesting to have people share those pain points in the discussion forum and then sit back ... To build a community means it's going to take a long time for people to build the trust, to share their work. It's not something that you just put in and then the next day, bang, it's gone.

So, the program itself, building the community did take time, but it was so important to be driven by the people. And so, that's why it was really positive to see the engineers in there, sharing knowledge, sharing their ideas, sharing their business processes, sharing their root cause analysis.

Michelle Ockers:

The New South Wales Health Workforce Planning Community showcased in episode 76, was similar in that it was created to meet a business need. It was also deliberately facilitated as a capability building initiative. Kathryn Hume explains how this came about following the publication of a report prepared by her colleague, Alice Dunne.

Kathryn Hume:

She wrote a report which specified and clearly defined what workforce planning was at all levels so, strategic, tactical, operational, and identified what the capability requirements were. When we tackled the capability piece, I really came across this situation, which I've come across it before, but this was really quite an imminent need where we didn't have the systems and processes. So, we didn't really have the time to create those first and then develop the capability.

We actually needed to provide these support tools, performance support tools, and develop them in a way that by applying those tools and utilizing them, that would actually develop capability through experiential learning. But doing it in social environment where you could liaise with other people and collaborate and talk about how you were applying it for your context, because everyone's context's so different.

I think there was capabilities that existed in the system, but we didn't have any visibility over it centrally. And so, our role was really to try and grasp that and harness it and pull it together, and really create something out of what existed. So, it's this ambidexterity to exploit what we already have-

Michelle Ockers:

Got it.

Kathryn Hume:

... but then explore what was possible, so as we could create new knowledge in that process. We have many, many very capable people out there, but it was all happening in silos.

Michelle Ockers:

Listen to episode 76, to hear about how Kathryn supported this community, including relationship building, facilitating design thinking, and curating and storing the resources they created. Her approach was very deliberate.

Kathryn Hume:

We overlaid design thinking and human-centred design approaches with learning theory and really directed ... I don't know what it would feel like from the participant point of view, I feel like it probably feels very fluid, but it was very intentional in the way we crafted our questions and engaged and led the conversations, to ensure we achieved that overall goal that was outlined in those initial discussion papers and action plan.

Michelle Ockers:

One of the workforce planners, Leigh Elligett, joined the podcast. Here's how she described her experience as a community member.

Leigh Elligett:

In the beginning of this particular process, I didn't actually realize that the aim was developing capability. I thought we were really focusing on developing tools and resources that we could all use, and that then the education and capability development would follow later. And I suppose it wasn't until I was immersed in the process that I realized, "Hey, wait on, this is what it's about."

I realized that I was sitting alongside these people with amazing skills and experience and such diversity in terms of what we brought to the discussion. And we've certainly had the idea of producing these tools and guides and a whole toolkit basically, that we can use and adapt to different contexts, depending on what we were doing. But the benefit has really been in the richness of the collaboration and working together.

Michelle Ockers:

Around six months after being set up, the value of the community was highlighted when COVID hit.

Kathryn Hume:

We had a real, genuine, really big problem to solve and we had to solve it, but this group just came together. And because of those foundations that we had, and because of those resources that were already sitting there, which I thought weren't actually finished, but because we got them to a point where they were usable over that time, when everyone else was busy, they actually became useful, but also the collaborative became useful.

So, we just created an extra page on that SharePoint site, which was now COVID related, and we shared resources and then I just curated them and pulled them together. If everybody had to do it themselves, that would've been maybe 20 or 30 little, mini projects they had to be running, but because we were able to share it, one person was able to focus on their little piece and bring it back to the group. So, because it was so time intensive, so it was so important that we had this immediately, it was just really nice to see how this group came together and delivered.

Michelle Ockers:

The final example comes from Arup, a global engineering consulting firm. In episode 24, Kim Sherwin discussed how their communities, which they call skills networks, are at the heart of their workforce capability strategy.

Kim Sherwin:

We just called it a skills network for our internal purposes, but the basic principles are around communities of practice, and these are around our major disciplines. So, for example, we're obviously multidisciplinary, we have things like the more technical disciplines, so structural, rail, highways, aviation, through to some of the more specialist disciplines around fire, acoustics, theatre consulting, for example. So, we span the whole spectrum of skill sets across our business.

But it's really to equip our professionals with the expertise and the skills that they need to be the best-in-class. It's also to have a presence externally as well, so that we're bringing our best people to our projects. And also, that we're bringing the best knowledge to our projects as well. So, one of the really exciting and interesting pieces around our skills networks is the exchange of knowledge and people use what we call forums to pose questions, and then they can pose technical questions, which then can be brought back into our client project work.

So, when people buy, I guess, a service from Arup, they're not just buying an individual's experience, they're buying a whole of Arup experience, and these forums really do support this. And it's quite impressive to see, even as technology's changed, the innate behaviour that we have here in terms of culture and knowledge sharing is really brought to life through our skills networks.

We appoint a skills leader for each of the respective networks. They set the strategic agenda of the individual networks, so where the focus is going to be. That might be about creating initiatives. It might be creating learning programs. It might be doing research. It might be engaging externally. But these are also roles that are in duet with daytime jobs, so it's important that the skills leader creates a network of people to help drive the skills network.

Michelle Ockers:

Key lessons from these three Learning Uncut stories are firstly, to link community purpose to a clear business need, and secondly, to determine the level of facilitation required at different points in the community life cycle. I'll hand it over to Kim for the final lesson.

Kim Sherwin:

What I've learned is it's about behaviour and it's about knowledge sharing and encouragement rather than slapping a new tool on somebody and then go use and expect it to fix the problems, because the tool, for me, is the enabler. It's very much the people side of things that's really deep.

About Learning Uncut

Learning Uncut are Learning and Development consultants that work with learning teams and/or business leaders to accelerate learning transformation. We specialise in supporting organisations to create or update their learning strategy, enhance their learning team's capabilities, align learning to business value, and implement modern learning approaches.

We are highly collaborative and pragmatic. We partner with organisations to align learning to their business needs, unleash continuous learning, and build capability to help them thrive.

Learn more about us at our website.

About your host, Michelle Ockers

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

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

- Australian Institute of Training and Development Dr Alastair Rylatt Award for L&D *Professional of the Year – for outstanding contribution to the practice of Learning and Development*
- *Internet Time Alliance Jay Cross Memorial Award – for outstanding contribution to the field of informal learning*

Find Michelle on LinkedIn or Twitter