

LEARNING UNCUT 11: DISTRIBUTED AUTHORSHIP – ROB WILKINS

Karen Moloney: Hi, and welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. I'm Karen Moloney.

Michelle Ockers: And I'm Michelle Ockers.

Karen Moloney: And today, we're talking to Rob Wilkins who is the leader of Information Management with the New South Wales Department of Education. Hi Rob. Welcome to the podcast.

Rob Wilkins: Hi Karen, how are you going? And thank you for having me.

Karen Moloney: You're very welcome Rob! Today we're talking about a topic which introduces a different way of looking at creating learning – and could make some of our audience quite nervous! - and that is distributed authorship. Michelle would you like to kick this one off?

Michelle Ockers: I would love to. Rob, the term "Distributed Authorship" is something which will be new to a lot of our listeners. Can you give us a brief definition of the term, and a high level description of what it looks like so we can get our heads around it?

Rob Wilkins: Yeah for sure. Look distributed authorship or, what I loosely term as "let go and let learn," is all about - and I'm going to do this from a pure learning and development sense - but think of learning management systems that are housed within organisations. Usually there's a dedicated team to being able to use that LMS, put things up there for people within the organisation, create courses, create e-learning, create Adobe Connect or virtual classroom sessions, whatever it is that they are actually doing. And they'll control the space in terms of how that learning management system is used, how people will enrol in that learning, how they will access resources within there and doing that.

Distributed authorship turns that on its head, and it says, instead of having two or three people within the organisation who are responsible for doing that, let's make sure that we've got, ten thousand in my case. People out there who have got a role on the learning management system that allows them to create learning from scratch, design the way that they will actually deliver their face to face education in their virtual classrooms, their e-learning and let **them** describe what the purpose of the learning is, why it's being rolled out, what it's being done for, what the expected objectives and outcomes are going to be and how people can actually enrol on that learning and participate on that, where the venues might be and what people might expect from the training.

That, in itself, in a nutshell, is what distributed authorship represents. Being able to hand over full control of your learning management system for the creation of, curation of, and distribution of learning.

Michelle Ockers: It's kind of radically different from what many people listening will be used to. When was it introduced into the Department of Education and why did this sort of letting go of control and handing over full control of course development, management delivery. When did that happen and why?

Rob Wilkins: I'm happy to say it pre-dated me. I've just have to augment this in a lot of ways. It pre-dated me ... it was primarily used for teacher education and it was primarily used in a way that their old learning management system was, for want of a better term, a glorified scheduling system where they would be able to actually put up and advertise sessions that were being run where teachers could come along and learn from other teachers.

When I was brought into the organisation, one of the things they were doing was realising that that system couldn't cater for all different modes of delivery and the need to have online learning and virtual classrooms and start to take effective learning technology that they already had for students but weren't necessarily using for their own professional development, rose to the top and what we did with it was basically say ... firstly ask the question, " so **why** do people want to learn from other teachers?" And fundamentally it was a very very simple answer. My preference to learn from a peer who was having major success in the way that they're applying pedagogical practice, in the way that they're structuring learning classrooms, learning environments, school classrooms and other things. My preference is to learn from people who are **doing**, and having **success** rather than learning from anybody who's got a nice theoretical basis or anything else that they'd actually like to apply to that.

And it became a really, really important aspect for us in terms of recognizing that fundamentally what existed through, I think, evolution was a peer education model within the organisation and that was highly respected and highly regarded and when something, I think has run organically and run naturally with an organisation, what you really want to do is not break that, not break the mould at all, but augment that in some way, shape or manner, and we used to have a lot of people who were given the ability to be able to schedule those classroom events if you like. All we did was augment that and take that and take that to another level and say to principals, and headteachers and deputies, " who would you like to have access to this system, how much access would you like them to actually have?" And we do have some limitations in terms of what we give them, but primarily, they've got the ability to be able to author any type of mode of delivery that they'd like. We do offer this learning either within the school, within the district or across the state if they feel that there's actually something worthwhile.

Michelle Ockers: Okay, so, and it's ... just to be clear because in the Education Department, there's a lot of students out there as well. This is very much about peer to peer learning, so teacher to teacher learning?

Rob Wilkins: Very much. This is about teacher professional development, and corporate professional development I might add too. There's nothing that actually doesn't stop any of our corporate colleagues running a program from a management

development sense or even a personal development sense and offering that to the wider corporate sphere also.

Karen Moloney: Just digging into some of the "how to's" around that, so look at the process for creating a course under the Distributed Authorship Model, you just walk us through a process that a teacher would follow, from having an idea for a piece of learning to actually getting it out there?

Rob Wilkins: There's fundamentally ... the learning management system we use, we use, work flows, that are based on a role based architecture. So in other words, what we say is "when we roll out this learning, there are four different types of learning that we consider from a work flow basis." Let me explain that just a tiny bit, a little bit of background to this. Teachers have now become very similar to a lot of professions, and the easiest way for me to make a like for like comparison is a Chartered Practising Accountant has a continuing professional development model that they have to adhere to, have to address and have to produce evidence of, so that they can maintain their CPA. Similarly now, teachers, through NESAs which is the old BOSTES or Board of Studies, has to maintain every five years, at least one hundred hours of accreditation, which must be made up of what we call fifty hours of registered learning and fifty hours of what they call Teacher Identified Professional Development.

So there was a key driver for the way that we looked at this in terms of being able to actually show people that there's a real ability to be able to do that. So when somebody considers putting some learning up there, they have the ability to be able to choose four modes, one being a registered course, another one being a school based registered course which is similar to a registered course but it's delivered to the school only, another one is what we call Teacher Identified Professional Development, or non-registered learning, and another one which is called non-teaching or corporate learning.

So depending on who you are, and what you're putting up there, you'll choose a workflow of your choice, and obviously a registered learning goes through a quality assurance process and goes through a team of people who are qualified to be able to look at that and say, "from an endorsed provider status, that meets the requirements of registered learning that NESAs would want to see, and we are happy to endorse that and let that actually go through."

So when I'm producing that, I'm producing it for a particular purpose and a particular reason and what I really like about the model is when I'm producing it for a registered audience, I'm producing it with a lot of top quality assurance in place that allows me to be able to actually produce that learning. So I know a lot of people will say "well, when you're letting go and letting learn, how do you provide for that quality?" Well that's one of the key factors that we put in place.

Karen Moloney: Just build into that framework.

Rob Wilkins: Yeah. And it's an incredible way of being to actually say, "I can still let go and let learn," but when it comes to something that people need to put their John

Hancock on and be able to actually submit to the Board of Studies or the New South Wales Education Standards Authority, they want to have some confidence that what they're submitting in terms of professional development they've undertaken, has been through a little bit of a rigorous process in terms of doing that.

So anybody can do any registered learning that they like, and there is no ... for instance, there is nothing that says that any subject matter is off the table at all. From bullying to Sports Education, to Arts education, to anything that they actually want to deliver on. It just says that if you want to go down the registered path, you want to be able to align that back to Australian teaching standards and how it's actually going to address those standards.

Karen Moloney: So, for the ones that are not on the registered side of things is there any quality checks or sign-offs or approvals from anybody or is it really open for the other workflows?

Rob Wilkins: It's not carte blanche by any stretch of the imagination, but as long as somebody's actually given a great summary of what they are going to do, given us a rationale as to why they want to deliver this and what they think the objectives and outcomes are going to be, it's only got two checks. It goes up to the principal for endorsement and then it actually comes through to our team purely for publishing in the catalogue, and what we're looking to do is to make sure that as it presents itself within the learning management system, that it's got some nice features and people are actually able to find it quite well. So we look at it, from an information management practice. We say to ourselves, "well what have they done? Have they actually chosen some really nice metadata in terms of people being able to search for this? Have they linked it back to something in terms of pedagogical practice, or an arts based practice or a sports based practice, that if people search on that they can actually find it quickly?"

Karen Moloney: Okay. So I imagine this is quite a different way of working for many teachers in terms of offering more blended and online solutions as opposed to the pure face to face. In the first place what were the main skills gaps that were identified for those teachers and how did you address them?

Rob Wilkins: The easiest way of answering that is, this is still ongoing. Skills gaps are very much an individual ... firstly an individual thing for a teacher. To be able to actually sit back and say, "what do I think I'm missing and what do I think that I need?" And then subsequently, the nice thing within a school is that you have headteachers, deputies, assistant principals and principals and there's ongoing conversations.

Rob Wilkins: It's just one of those things that struck me that teachers and life-long learning, they just go hand-in-hand.

Michelle Ockers: Rob, can we circle back a little bit to that workflow question. It felt like when you were talking about that end to end process for a teacher to create a course, it felt like you were talking about what the workflow is for actually publishing a course and getting it approved, what happens before that? So a teacher might have an idea for something that they think their peers would be interested in and benefit from, before it actually gets to the point of a course being ready to publish, what are the steps they'd typically go through?

Rob Wilkins: There are two factors that they have to take into account Michelle, and it's a great way of being able to actually put them on the spot in terms of being able to do it. They make two very distinct declarations as part of a workflow, but it goes back to the heart of when they first commence putting the content together. The first one is that they are happy to actually say that they haven't copied anybody's work, and primarily that comes down to intellectual property and the way that teachers actually value that; the second thing is that they are making another declaration in that in doing their own work, they've researched and made sure that they're not duplicating any content within the system at that point of time.

You'll see content variations that come to light and what I do like about that is that whilst people are focusing on literacy and numeracy, it's contextual and it gives them the ability to actually sit down with their principal and say " I think there is a way of publishing this course so we take in the context of all those refugees that we've actually come on, on visa subclass XXX, and we really need to be able to do that." I can give you stories where we've had refugees who've had to have an interpreter as they sign their children up for education, and they might be nine and eleven years of age, and this is the first school that they've ever attended in their time, and they don't speak English as a first language. They really do need to have an interpreter there that can do that, and we literally have to have the interpreter hold their hand while they mark an X on the form to enrol their children in school, and film that and submit that as video evidence when children have been enrolled.

And when you take that as an example versus somebody who's trying to get their child into a selective high school, that shows you the variation in terms of everything a teacher's got to deal with.

So when we talk about those two attestations, those two declarations, and the way that they pull content together, we're really talking about people who are actually doing courses for courses, they're really considering their audience, why they're putting the content together because if I had a literacy and numeracy for K-6 program, that program is just going to exist as it is, and everybody's going to deliver against that, and what we know about school life, and what we know about children and what we know about socioeconomic index factors, and everything else that comes into play, is that that context needs to be taken into account so we have effective delivery and that's what teachers really spend their time on when they start focusing in on the content.

Michelle Ockers: If we think about the traditional Addie model, analyse, design, develop, implement, evaluate, which a lot of us are still using in learning and development when we're looking at developing programs, it sounds like a lot of what you've talked about there is in the analyse phase, when it comes to design and develop, is that something where L & D is completely hands off and it's up to each of the individual authors to determine how they are going to design and develop the program that they are creating?

Rob Wilkins: Absolutely. There are no rules. If people decided that they think that the best way to deliver this is in succinct bite size ten minute video podcasts of lessons and they're going to link all that together under one course, they can do that. If they feel like it needs to be delivered in four twilight sessions between 3.30 and 5pm in the afternoon in a technology literate classroom where they can include video broadcasts and bring in guest lecturers, they can do that.

If they want to do it all via Adobe Connect and have virtual classrooms with breakout rooms and deliver that over four evenings from 6 to 7.30 in the evening, they can do that. There is absolutely no limitations other than obviously the technology band width and other considerations that normally, corporates and anybody else would actually consider in terms of the way that they put that together, but from a design and develop and implement and evaluate sense, they can do whatever they want to do.

Karen Moloney: If that's the case then, how does that fit back into the role of L&D in this model in terms of their responsibilities and the support that they provide? It's essentially de-centralised L&D.

Rob Wilkins: Yeah, it's not even decentralised L&D because nobody would consider themselves a learning development professional ...

Karen Moloney: Yeah, I suppose.

Rob Wilkins: It's peers teaching peers. And under a peer education model, that's why I said we're spoilt and we're lucky because it's not like these people wouldn't actually know what a lesson plan looks like and wouldn't know how to actually test and evaluate when the learning is taking place, but most of them are actually rooted in pedagogical design not androgogical design. So there's some real considerations there and if they do need to call on them, we do have a leadership development unit, or professional, what we call, teacher quality unit, and it's consultation. They ring up and say " What would you do? What are some of the thing we should consider? This is the approach I'd like to take, what do you think?

And we provide tacit advice, but it's more done on a consultative basis in terms of being able to do that. And this probably brings us to the key in terms of " how do you evaluate that?" Well you can actually do formal evaluation of it, you can do both formative and summative evaluation if you are really conscious of doing that, but what we tended to do in terms of the model is to actually say, " if the enrolments are low and we find nobody's been participating in that for the last

six months, it's archived, it's gone and get on and find something that's really going to appeal to your audience." And people are happy to do that, because they realised that what they thought was a burgeoning need wasn't a burgeoning need, and we sort of let the foot traffic and the enrolments and feedback in the way people have actually reacted to learning, guide how long that learning hangs around and how soon it actually leaves the catalogue.

Karen Moloney: Yeah, okay. Which just answered my next question.

Very efficient guest.

The thing about the actual implementation of that model, it's just a completely different way for those people to work; it's just a big old beast, from many aspects. So in terms of implementation, how did you roll out the model and what were the main issues that you faced?

Rob Wilkins: We're still rolling it out.

Karen Moloney: That was a deep sigh.

Rob Wilkins Yeah, it's sheer scale. I can say with almost 98% confidence, we're probably one of the largest learning management systems in the Southern Hemisphere in terms of users. We clocked up around 212,000 users only a couple of months ago, and different audiences in terms of being able to do that, but when I get fundamentally back down to my audiences, it's sort of understanding that ... primarily it's the scale that really gets in the way, so change management, communication, really, really difficult. What we do know though is that the influential people if you actually ... and one of the things that we tried to do but our IT directorate really didn't have the tools in place, they have them now, so in two years' time, we'll know more about that. But we tried to actually look at our Yammer network group, teachers have a big Yammer incidence within the organisation. We looked at the conversations that are happening out there in the little subgroups that have been set up and tried to actually do some social network analysis in terms of who's who at the zoo and what are they actually doing.

We didn't actually find any key influencers within the organisation so that was a bit of a downer for us, but what we did find, what we did find is some really, really strong subject matter. Literacy and numeracy obviously always going to be a big one, but the picture also differs quite distinctively different between secondary and primary education.

So I'd love to be able to actually say, we've nailed the communication and change management around it, but we haven't ... but what we are good at doing is choosing targeted selection or selectively targeting influencers who we think ... like learning authors, like principles and like our teacher quality advisors, who we know are heavily influential groups who can actually get a lot of information out there. One of our heaviest users for instance, are school administration staff, and they use it for their non-teaching corporate style

learning. Well they've got a representation group of around about 30 ladies who come together, ladies and men I should say, who come together around about once every month or so. We've also targeted them as a group to disseminate information, learning, communication and updates about what's available within the system and how they can actually utilize that.

But I'd love to say that we just continued to find ways and trying to find influences. That's the easiest way of being able to actually get the message out there.

Michelle Ockers: So Rob, you've described an environment where there are non-teaching staff who are amongst the authors, but the bulk of the authoring is being done by people who are already teachers, so this whole idea of the trust that learning and development are going to have to let go and let learn and allow people across the organisation to start authoring their own programs, it strikes me there that that's a pretty conducive environment to be able to let go. When you think about some of the corporate organisations you've previously worked in, do you think this approach, this distributed authoring approach, is going to be suitable for corporate environments rather than educational settings and why or why not? What would it take to make it work?

Rob Wilkins: I can remember doing a particular program when I worked for AMP many, many years ago, on product education, and what struck me about that was how much I had to actually research, learn, document, focus groups, uncover rocks, bring things out from under rocks, talk about the impact of the product education from a marketing sense, from a risk and compliance sense, from a pure information sense, from a customer understanding sense and a whole range of other things. And when I look back on that, and I look at the people like product managers and product owners who had all that knowledge straight away, how easy would it be just to teach them how to pull this up there and get it up there in terms of the form that they wanted to.

It's not a lot to learn a learning management system, it's not a lot to learn how to use Adobe Connect, it's not a lot to actually learn a new piece of software nowadays, we do it consistently if we are going on Trivago or TripAdvisor or anywhere else. It just depends on your motivation for why you are using the software. And I just don't see why in a corporate context, we can't let go and let learn. I don't know what the barriers would be other than command and control, and I'm very ... I have my little sayings. A lot of things that everybody says, but at a meet up a fortnight ago I talked about the fact that most learning and development models and most learning and development teams are a mere reflection of what their leadership will tolerate at any given point in time, given market conditions.

And I think that's the only constraint that you've actually got, but if you're handing control over and you become the expert in terms of consultation, in terms of where to direct effort, what to actually do in this case, why people should consider using a virtual classroom versus anything else, and having the data to actually support that, these people work with their data on a daily basis,

these people know how their product for instance is performing out in the market place and how it compares to its competitors. These people have data in terms of where the most successful regions or geographies are in terms of the product sales. These people have all the data and the information required in terms of being able to actually say what constitutes success factors, what constitutes the barriers, what are some of the hurdles and how you might actually overcome them? And they've got sales leaders out there who are actually very skilled in terms of " how do you overcome rejections, what are the types of things that you need to look at?"

Why wouldn't you hand it over to them? They're the ones with all the knowledge, all they don't really truly understand, is "how do I construct this is a way that has the biggest impact for the learner?" And that's what we're there to consult on. So our role doesn't go away, our role just becomes what it should be, which is to actually consult on the expertise in terms of making it the most successful program it should be.

Michelle Ockers: Yeah, so potentially a higher level of consultation support required around how to effectively design and develop and deliver the learning, then in your environment where there's already a level of expertise around that because they are teachers and grounded in pedagogy for instance, but really you can't see any reason why this model couldn't be adopted more broadly?

Rob Wilkins: Absolutely not. Let's take a financial services organisation or even a retail organisation, store managers, branch managers, anybody else, do daily stand-up sessions or do daily training sessions depending on what they actually see as the issues in their local workplace. They're doing it anyhow. Whether they're doing it with success or not comes down to how much they are reaching out and what they are trying to achieve. And as we get closer to what I call the XAPI dream, which is using all the resources within the organisation to create learner patterns and understand learner centric derived learning and how you can actually implement that within learning management systems, to let go and let learn, in a curated learning and curated content, start to actually take a platform within the organisation, letting go and letting learn is the way to actually go from a modelling perspective as far as I can see.

It's probably been the greatest reformation for me in the last ten or fifteen years when I've been doing this, to actually walk into a place that's done it organically but then take it and start to say, these guys could do anything it they've got the right practice and the right support.

Karen Moloney: So if anybody listening is thinking about looking into the model distributed authorship what would be the top tip that you would give them in terms of getting started?

Rob Wilkins: I really think that what you've got to do is go meet friends of learning, your friends of L&D, but my big thing would be to - wherever you had the growth and the successes in the organisation in the past, and say to them " Look, we've actually got a proposal for you and what we'd like to do is run this as a

controlled setting, and really give you the opportunity over the next twelve months to really be able to actually utilise the learning management system in a way that we think it should be used, and for instance, utilize some of the technologies that we've got available to you and actually hand control over to you to actually define what you've got there, and be on the periphery to help you at any point in time." And sometimes you might have to lend a hand purely because of resource or you may have to lend a hand purely because of a lack of understanding, but that's your role.

It's to consult in there and be able to do it, but I'd pick a pretty chunky team whose got a reasonably high L&D demand for the next twelve months. It's nice to actually have a group of people or somebody from a leadership perspective, who takes it seriously, has professional development plans in place, knows what that needs to look like, and it's learning that's obviously outside of the current catalogue, it's learning that's been identified as something that's going to take them to another place and it forms part of a wider strategic planning, having that area where you can just let go and train these people up in terms of being able to actually run these sessions and take the whole thing over themselves and then just draw on the consultancy to make it a really, really fine product.

And I think that would be the way that I would want to go from a corporate sense, find a place where I could actually prove a model and actually prove what exists and what why it exists.

Karen Moloney: Yeah, I think that's great advice.

Are there any resources that you used throughout this process to help educate yourself on distributed authorship and how you can come at that model that we could refer people to?

Rob Wilkins: Yeah. It brings me back to one of my pet things that I think are really, really important, but I think a learning and development team now, in the corporate world, that doesn't have a data analyst as part of their team, isn't a learning and development team any more.

We started analysing professional development data and started looking at typically where we people spending their time and what were they actually learning, then we were actually looking at other data, in terms of NAPLAN data and other various aspects in terms of our schools infrastructure data, we started looking at forward thinking about New South Wales infrastructure data, looking at socioeconomic indexes from the ABS and a whole range of other things that informed our landscape in terms of where we should be actually, putting resources and putting bang for buck, in terms of being able to do that.

So that for me is one of the things that L & D really, really needs to come back to, is start having a look at data analytics, and start having a look at what informs their landscape as to where they should actually spend time and what they should do. I think it's critical now, moving forward in the learning and development world, to have somebody on your team whose just as au fait with

the business as any of the other business analysts sitting in other teams within the corporate world.

Awesome. So could you just share with us the biggest thing that you do for your own professional development?

Rob Wilkins: Have conversations like this!

Karen Moloney: I'm learning so much through this podcast, I can't tell you!

Rob Wilkins: Yes, I know. Podcasts for me, podcasts are enormous now. They are incredibly viable. I have to say, Michelle can probably relate to this, I started sometime ago, broadening my network in terms of the use of Twitter and LinkedIn. I was one of these strong protagonists for not adding somebody on LinkedIn unless I'd met them face to face and other things. But what I did get into was micro blogging. I had a blog and I've still got my blog sitting there and I think one day I'll get back to it and start writing again, but what I came away with as I moved into far more senior leadership positions and particularly when I moved into the Head of Learning and Development at Aussie Home Loans, I was someone who was becoming very, poor and short on time and I think for me what I needed to do was get back to sharing resource and sharing learning and sharing everything that I was reading with like-minded people, and what I've found now within my ... I've probably got about three and a half thousand people on LinkedIn, in my network, but it's become not only a network of trusted resources for want of a better terminology, but in publishing a lot of what I publish from a micro blogging sense.

I use tools in the background, where I publish just once on LinkedIn and it then goes out to a far wider distributed network in terms of Twitter, publishing that on Twitter and going to a couple of enclosed places that are walled garden areas where I'm part of formal learning areas, and I'd have to say the art of producing and consuming and sharing information and sharing research and sharing knowledge has given me ... and now I'd have to say looking at blogs, and listening to podcasts, are another couple of really, really prime examples of just engaging in the production and consumption of that information and research and being very, very proactive about how you actually share all that, and I'm surprised now, I've actually put three or four articles up on any given day when I've actually come across something I think is worth sharing, and that gets anywhere between two hundred and three hundred views across the LinkedIn network and equally a similar amount within Twitter, and they then go on to either share that or talk about that, or do whatever that needs to do, and then, inevitably, people come back to me and say " hey, have you come across anything in this subject area, or this subject area?"

Rob Wilkins: And sometimes I'll say " No. How about we get together and have a cup of coffee and do that?" And invariably, that leads to wider connections and more connections, lots of cups of coffee, but it just continuously reinforces the network of people that mean a lot to me in terms of my own professional development. So it's that networked basis and that production and

consumption of information and sharing that I think is probably my greatest learning atmosphere at the moment.

Karen Moloney: Yeah, the network is so valuable isn't it?

Okay, so if anybody wants to get in touch with you to find out more about the project or the topic, what's the best way for them to do that? Would it be LinkedIn or Twitter?

Rob Wilkins: Yeah, LinkedIn or Twitter. Professional standpoint, so @wilco64 on Twitter and then Rob Wilkins on LinkedIn from Australian companies, I think I come up pretty close to the top.

Karen Moloney: Yeah, we'll pop some links into the show notes so people can get in touch with you.

Thank you so much Rob for sharing that, I could probably talk to you for another hour at least about all of this stuff, it's a really, really interesting project, so appreciate you coming in and sharing your insights with us.

Thank you very much.

Rob Wilkins: Not a problem.

Thanks for having me guys.

Michelle Ockers: Thank you, and thank you from me Rob. Thank you for the bold vision of the potential future of Learning & Development.

Karen Moloney: We like bold here.

Rob Wilkins: Yeah, bold is good, it's not gonna be without it's difficulties. It's definitely bold, but it's worthwhile.