Learning Uncut Episode 129
Storytelling Micro-Credential at Waka Kotahi – Stacie
Swindon and Marcus Garrett
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers:
Today we take a close look at how one organisation has piloted a customised micro-credential to develop storytelling skills across their workforce. I'm joined by Stacie Swindon, a learning and development consultant from Waka Kotahi New Zealand Transport Agency and Marcus Garrett, an instructional designer from RMIT Online who partnered on this project. I had the pleasure of helping to shape the requirements for this pilot, and doing the evaluation, so it's really nice to both be hosting today's conversation and helping to tell the story.

As L&D teams come to grips with skills-based development strategies we're seeing an increased interest in micro-credentials. I spoke on this topic at the Australian Institute of Training and Development conference in June 2023. If you want to explore micro-credentials you'll find a collection of resources and examples that I curated, along with my conference presentation in this show notes.

Speaking of my work on this project, did you know that Learning Uncut is not just a podcast, but also a Learning and Development consultancy that helps you increase business impact? If you'd like speak with me about evaluation – or any aspect of your learning strategy - book in call using the contact form on our website at learninguncut.global.

Let's get into the conversation, which Stacie opens and closes beautifully with a Māori incantation.

Stacie Swindon:
Whakataka te hau ki te uru,
Whakataka te hau ki te tonga
Kia mākinakina ki uta
Kia mātaratara ki tai
E hī ake ana te atākura he tio
He huka, he hauhu
Haumi e! Hui e! tāiki e!

Michelle Ockers:
Stacie, thank you for the karakia, can you tell us a little bit about the purpose of the karakia and maybe explain what that Karakia was about?

Stacie Swindon:
So the purpose of a karakia is an incantation. So it's basically opening and setting the scene. So the one I mentioned today talked about ceasing of the winds from the west, ceasing of the winds from the south, bringing calm breezes over the land, bringing calm breezes over the sea and let the red-tipped dawn come with a touch of frost and sharpened air and promise a glorious day and behold the lives that we live, basically. So I think it's really just around where we all come from and just embracing what the day has to offer.

Michelle Ockers:
Lovely. Marcus, how does that make you feel when you hear either the karakia in general through the work we've done with Waka Kotahi or that specific karakia?

Marcus Garrett:
It's been such a lovely way to start each aspect of the project. So every time we'd meet with Waka Kotahi, we'd have that karakia either from Stacie or from one of the cultural team members. And yeah, just a beautiful reflection and reminder of one of the key themes that ran through the work that we do.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, absolutely. I find it really grounding and particularly then, Stacie, when you went through what that means, we're actually having this conversation at the start of a working day on a Friday and it's kind of really centering and bringing this together.

Marcus Garrett:
It is.

Michelle Ockers:
Isn't it

Stacie Swindon:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
And setting the tone for the work we're going to do together. So indeed, it is a beautiful part of the work. If anyone has the good fortune to work with an organization from New Zealand that is as grounded and committed to Te Ao Māori as Waka Kotahi is, it's a lovely part of working with your organization Stacie. So thank you for opening us up.

Stacie Swindon:
Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:
And of course, this is not the first conversation on the podcast about work from Waka Kotahi. And I'll put show notes to a couple of the others that we've had which set the scene in some ways for today's conversation. One was with Zoe Freeman, your strategic advisor about your L&D strategy, and the other was with Claudia Faletolu, who at the time that this body of work on the micro credential pilot we're going to talk about was done, she was indeed your Māori cultural advisor. So Stacie, would you like to introduce us to Waka Kotahi for anyone who hasn't listened to those other episodes?

Stacie Swindon:
Nau mae haere mai ko te Learning Uncut podcast
Kei Waka Kotahi au e mahi ana
He Kaitohutohu Mātanga au
Ko Stacie Swindon tōku ingoa
Nō reira, tēna koutou, tēnā koutou, tēnā koutou katoa

So basically what I've said there, I've just said, welcome to the Learning Uncut Podcast. And my name is Stacie Swindon and I'm a senior learning and development consultant working for Waka Kotahi, which is the New Zealand Transport Agency.

Michelle Ockers:
So tell us a little bit about the work of the Transport Agency, Stacie.

Stacie Swindon:
So well, our primary function is to promote, obviously an affordable and a safe land transport service system for the entire Aotearoa New Zealand. So we're just making sure that we get everybody home safely every single day and that the roads that we have are safe and usable.

Michelle Ockers:
Thank you. And so today we're going to talk about the Communicating with Storytelling micro-credential pilot that was run by Waka Kotahi in partnership with RMIT Online. What was your role in the project, Stacie?

Stacie Swindon:
So I came in to lead this project, and so making sure that we are on track and connecting in with RMIT's project lead as well.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. And you joined when RMIT had been engaged, right?

Stacie Swindon:
100%.

Michelle Ockers:
To take leadership on design, delivery, support of the project.

Stacie Swindon:
Yes.

Michelle Ockers:
And Marcus, you're here representing the partner in this work, RMIT Online. Would you like to talk to us about who RMIT Online is, what you do, and your role on the project.

Marcus Garrett:
The RMIT Online, I guess, like an adjunct or part of RMIT University. We're a separate unit, so we operate separately, but we're, of course, part of the University and work alongside them. The University and where we work sits on the grounds of the Wurundjeri people of the Kulin Nation and just to acknowledge owners of country where the university sits too, and that the University recognize all those past and present. I guess RMIT Online has been around, I think, for it's about five or six years now. And the work started pre-pandemic with RMIT Online to look at delivery of both accredited and ultimately non accredited programs within the University in a fully online capacity. So most of our products and services, in fact, all of our products and services are delivered fully online, both synchronously and asynchronously as well. So that's what we do.

Michelle Ockers:
And if I've understood it correctly, you're part of the University, but you're kind of a, more like a commercial arm working with...

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah, that's right. Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
The organizations rather than directly with students who are enrolled in the university courses.

Marcus Garrett:
Correct. Yeah. So my role... I'm a learning designer, and my role is to work with the workforce development team quite closely as we develop learning solutions for our commercial customers, so most of whom are enterprise in some shape or form, whether that be government or private sector organizations. And my particular role is to customize and tailor learning solutions, micro-credentials specifically, but also some other types of learning solutions for those customers.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. And of course, I played a role in this project as well. In fact, I was part of it before RMIT Online joined and before Stacie, you joined the project, and we're going to talk about where this project fits in with the strategy in a moment. But I helped to shape the requirements and help Waka Kotahi to find a partner to do the market research and find a partner for this micro-credential. And then I stepped back from it. And more recently, I've been doing the evaluation of the micro-credential. So it's nice to be sharing a story that I was part of the work on as well. And with that, Stacie, let's talk about the business need that led to the pilot of the micro-credentials and why, why pilot Micro-credentials? Why was this important to the organization?

Stacie Swindon:
So I know you mentioned previously around our strategy, so that's the Tā tātou Rautaki Akoranga. Which is our learning strategy. And micro-credentials was identified as the game changer initiative. And we came to the understanding that we really think this will be something that could help support and uplift our people. And also because micro-credentials are smaller than a full qualification, I think it makes it really accessible for people. And it allows them to achieve specific skills and knowledge, that they're then able to apply directly back into the work context. And I think when you can do something like that, it helps apply the learning because they can actually see the practicality of what they busy learning and the skills that they can then apply back into their work. And it was also a new opportunity, a new learning opportunity for our people. because we've done it in more of the compliance space, but we've never done it at this scale. So I think as you know Michelle, in the earlier discovery work, when you did have conversations with people, they did say that doing a micro-credential, it has that credibility. And it also has something that people find, okay, this is credible. So it's important for people to have a micro-credential, I think.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, I think that credibility was critical. And Stacie, we did some focus groups. You mentioned government in the compliance space, government regulatory space, and health and safety. Waka Kotahi had already used some existing micro-credentials that were on offer to all of your government agencies. And what we found people valued most kind of the value proposition around that was around really being able to see development of skills and application of skills either for today, but also for the future. There was a point about the recognition that came with the micro-credential and also something that was mentioned was the need for support. So there were four key parts of the... Or four key answers to why do they work for me? When we talked to people who'd done them before, the first is they saw them as relevant, so they were looking for application. And I think that's a big part of what we were looking for when we went out to market and said, who can help us to offer something

that people can apply immediately to their role that'll help them now, but also set them up for the future. So it had to be career building as well.

And I know Marcus, we're gonna talk about what are micro-creds in a moment, but the idea is stackability and being able to take build up skills in these smaller chunks and stack them to a bigger qualification and was part of the value proposition. Recognition and really having recognition outside of the organization with a respected provider of a micro-cred that was, critical. And then peer connection, which isn't necessarily always required of a micro-credential, but in this case, one of the things that had been really valued by the people who'd done micro-creds through in Waka Kotahi the past was peer connection and support. So I think those four things really tie in nicely together, relevant recognized career building and peer connection. So we were looking for those as part of the value proposition. And of course, some of those are not unique to micro-creds. I think the relevance and peer connection maybe are not unique, but I think Marcus, this might be a good time to talk about, what are organizations typically looking for when they come to you? And was Waka Kotahi any different? And the value of micro-creds, I think that those two points around recognition and that it's career building in particular make micro-creds stand out. So talk to us a bit more about what are organizations trying to achieve with micro-creds when they come and talk to you about it?

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah, well, look, they are... It is quite common for organizations seeking micro-credentials as a solution to be looking at a specific skill or area of capability that they've identified as a need or a skills gap and we know that through multiple bits of research that it's a lot cheaper generally speaking to train than it is to hire, I think it's about 36 days to replace someone. And that doesn't include how long it takes them to get up to speed. But of course, if you've got a broad skill that needs addressing in the organization, you don't want to be replacing everyone just so that you can get access to that skill through wiring. So that is a common thing to be addressing the skills gap.

As you've just said, what is a little bit more unique is, I guess, two aspects. The first is that point about making sure that the learning and also the assessment process is deeply embedded in the work that people do. We often talk about our DNA at RMIT Online and I guess fundamental to the DNA of our solutions is that the assessments and the work done throughout any of our short courses and micro-credentials applies to work and is actually relevant to what people are doing in their day to day.

So that's firstly really important. I'll talk a little bit more about how that works from an assessment perspective a bit later. And then the second thing is that whole idea of socializing, learning really keen on the saying, just because it's online, learning doesn't mean it's by myself learning. And so that peer engagement, engagement with a really good course mentor or teacher, really helps to activate learning, particularly when it's online because, if it's completely by yourself and asynchronous, it can be quite isolating. And that then has impacts on motivation as we know as well. So having that good peer engagement piece and mechanisms and built-in features for doing that.

Michelle Ockers:
So that peer connection, that's a common request when organizations come to you and talk to you about what they're trying to achieve?

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah, again, it depends. If it's something that's quite specialized and people... It's not the kind of thing that people could generally have a chat around with anyone around the work,

for example, then absolutely, absolutely. Yes. All our short courses involve active synchronous and asynchronous peer engagement and engagement with a mentor. So, yes.

Michelle Ockers:
Yep. What about this idea of future skills? So I know we're at a point now, we've got a couple of things going on in the labor market generally. One is you mentioned hiring versus building skills internally. I think there is just generally people, organizations are finding it more challenging to get people with the skills they're looking for. So we are seeing more internal skill development. But then there's also this question of sometimes the skill-set's evolving so rapidly that you just can't stay ahead of the curve with an internal L&D team. Or you just don't have the expertise available to you and the body of knowledge to develop skill development initiatives without going to something like a micro-cred where you've got the robustness and you've gotten like a credible organization working with you to build future skills. What's the balance you're seeing between skills for today versus building skills which are kind of more at the cutting edge that organizations are having trouble recruiting in?

Marcus Garrett:
So I guess the answer to that is making sure that you've got industry experience as well as, that set static piece of content within a particular qualification or course.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah.

Marcus Garrett:
Making sure that a person that's working with your learners knows what's happening in industry and knows what's ahead for industry as well. And that kind of then brings a dynamic aspect to the learning. I remember we were doing uplift of... It was one of our digital courses late last year, and I was having a chat to the subject matter expert, but in that course he was also a course mentor and he was able to talk about what is happening in that digital space that he was working in and what was soon to be ahead rather than what the status quo was at the moment. It was around security cybersecurity. So he was talking about some of the cloud-based security solutions that are on the roadmap and starting to be developed. And we were able to do a quick hot fix in that course and tweak it so that... So the content was more than current. It was actually forward looking as well.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. So Stacie, I know in the qualification we're going to talk about that idea of working with industry, bringing it outside and working with external industry experts that was an important part of what happened here, wasn't it? Yeah.

Stacie Swindon:
Yes, we had the industry experts and they actually have worked very closely with Claudia throughout the development.

Michelle Ockers:
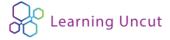Yeah. And they came from beyond RMIT Online, right?

Stacie Swindon:
Yes.

Michelle Ockers:
Marcus. They weren't internal to RMIT Online.

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
But you actually go out and find external experts from the industry sector to work with.

Marcus Garrett:
That's right. Yeah. I had... I was very fortunate to have worked with, and I'll give her a shout out. So Roxanie Hibbins, who has worked in the area of business communication for a very long period of time she has a really interesting background. She was a psychotherapist at one stage. She was also a learning designer, which certainly made the process for us easier as well. because she understood the process of storyboarding. But as I said, she was also an expert in business communication. So yeah, she was able to work with us and work closely with Claudia as the cultural advisor. They developed very quickly a really good working relationship. And so it was great to have that industry expertise available to us.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. And it's part of what lends credibility beyond just using people who've got the best knowledge inside the organization, right? You're ensuring that what you're doing is positioned in industry need and good practice across the industry rather than just internal to the organization. There's an elephant in the room, I think we've got to talk about upfront. What makes a micro-cred micro? How long is micro? Let's talk about that.

Marcus Garrett:
The myth busting.

Stacie Swindon:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. Who'd like to start on that one? And the experience of positioning a micro-cred in... Well, maybe Stacie with you inside the organization, the language around micro-credentials and talking micro with the entire... Inside the organization. Did you explicitly talk about this as a micro-cred and what does that mean?

Stacie Swindon:
Yeah, so we did do that, but I will be honest there is still some awareness that we need to do internally as well because I think when you can say it's a micro-credential and it's gonna be this many hours, hearing the feedback, people still felt like, oh, I didn't realize it was gonna take this much time or I didn't think it was gonna do this. So I think we still need to do some awareness more on our side. But it is that age old thing around, oh, I didn't think it was gonna be this long. I really thought it's a few hours of my day and it's done. So I think that still needs to definitely be agreed. And I think with the likes of Marcus, I know that in the initial thinking, we did have a couple of hours scheduled and we said, no, we need to cut that back a little bit more because we also do know that time is a factor for our people.

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. And when we say couple of hours, we're actually like the Australian, and I'll put in, there's an Australian national framework and I know there's also a New Zealand national framework, and I think that the government frameworks, I'm seeing a lot of governments grappling with micro-credentials and where they... Where do they fit in the qualification framework. And it's a really confusing landscape, particularly on the matter of length. But in Australia, it could be anywhere from one hour, right all the way through to just short of like a certificate, two or three, which is tens, multiples of tens of hours. What's your experience with the language around micro-credential, Marcus?

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah. You're right in that a lot of people hear the word micro, at the start of micro-credentials and think it's just going to be an hour. I always think of Neo in the Matrix with something in the back of his head and he wakes up and says, "I know Kung Fu now." It doesn't really work like that. And it's true, we have micro-credentials that are four to six hours and we also have micro-credentials that are 80 to 100 hours and delivered over a much longer period of time, obviously. It's universal particularly with our business solutions that they need to be designed for busy professional working people who don't have a lot of time. They've got BAU and they've got busy family lives and personal lives and they're fitting their learning in, either within the job or often if it's personally, something they personally want to do outside work hours and time. So we're conscious that micro-credentials when they're delivered need to fit in and around busy schedules for professional working people. But it's not necessarily the case that a micro-credential is that whole idea of stackable learning. Sometimes we do say, "Look, set aside 10 hours a week for this, so that you've got time to do some reading and do some collaborating and chatting to peers and the mentor, and you've got time to prepare your work-based assessment.
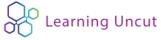
Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, and I guess it comes back to good quality learning design. If you're doing a course as part of the micro-credential, I'm gonna come on to that myth in a moment. But how many hours was this program, the communication micro-credential designed to take? What was the target hours per week and how many weeks?

Stacie Swindon:
So we had, the total hours was 25 over a six-week period. When I on-boarded the two cohorts, I did say, "If you can at least block out an hour a day, that's five hours a week, you should be able to get through what you're supposed to be getting through."

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. So it's not an inconsequential amount of effort. And I think if people think the micro is in relation to external qualifications that are offered under National Qualifications Frameworks, not in relation... Like not in the context of micro-learning as in here's a 15-minute video. I think that's quite important. The other myth, and we don't have to talk about this for a long time, but we certainly did think about it when we were looking at the requirements for this pilot. The micro-credential itself is issued based on an assessment of skills and the application of skills and evidence that skills can be applied. It doesn't always need a course to build those skills. So we did consider when we looked at the requirements, do we want to offer this as an assessment only pathway potentially, using workplace based evidence to meet a set of evidence requirements, which was indeed what Westpac has done with micro-credentials. And I did do a story with Westpac here in Australia around an assessment only micro-credential approach and I'll share that in the show notes. But we specifically said, "No, in this case, we want to have people doing a course to develop the

skills and then accumulating a body of evidence to meet assessment requirements." But do you do much work at RMIT online Marcus, with assessment only for micro-credentials?

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah, we do. We do, actually we call that our credentialing product, so to speak. It's really just as you described, Michelle. So what we're actually doing is asking candidates to collect a body of... Collect the evidence items against a set outcome. We use a backward design approach to coming up with all our credentials in our business solutions. And that means we start with what needs to be achieved and that's obviously reflecting the business need. And then we say, "Well, okay, what pieces of evidence would reflect that need most accurately in a way that can be demonstrated in the workplace?" And we'll ask learners to collect that evidence and then submit it as an assessment. And having said that, that's all been assessed independently against a very clear and robust rubric.

So all of our programs have to go through a university approvals committee and meet the quality assurance requirements that we have as a higher education provider. So it's no different to the kinds of assessments that would be done in an accredited program. It just means that we're reflecting the work-based assessment rather than front-loading content learning. We're just getting them to collect that evidence as they go through the working hours.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, thank you. And I think it's worth noting we're talking about RMIT Online as a body that sits within the university sector, although you've got some distinctive characteristics that allow you to operate more flexibly, you're not tied into things that are just part of a National Qualifications Framework. But the main thing is the credentialing authority needs to be credible and carry some authority. And if people take their credential and go, and look for a job elsewhere, that people can look at and go, "Yeah, that carries weight in our industry." So I've seen when we went out looking for providers for this pilot, we looked at professional associations as another possibility. There's also some other organisations which offer certification that aren't part of a university.

So just so people are aware that there's a large number of providers, but that actually makes it even harder to find the right provider to work with. And it's really easy for people just to put up a shingle and say, "We're offering a micro-cred." But when you dig under it, there's actually no substance to the assessment process. There's no application required. Sometimes people are issuing micro-creds based on just course completions, which as we know, doesn't equate to application and doesn't carry the credibility.

And we found that in this particular pilot, people wanted the credibility. They were happy to do the work and motivated to do the work to get something that was credible and that was recognised. They felt was gonna be recognised and valued. So that's a trap for young players I think when they're looking at the market. So let's move on and start talking about this communicating with storytelling program, which on the surface of it, you might think, "Oh, that's an interesting thing to pick for a micro-credential." I think we're used to seeing things that maybe are a bit more tech focused. And Marcus, you talked about cyber security as an example. Why was this skill important in Waka Kotahi Stacie, and what was the organization thinking about needing communicating with storytelling skills?

Stacie Swindon:
So, I think storytelling has definitely been identified as one of the capability areas that our people will need. And I think if you look at it, I call storytelling a power skill. And why I call it that, it really creates meaningful connections with the people. And if you look at the work that

we're doing, people are the center of everything that we do. So as an organisation, I think we want to establish more of an emotional connection with the people that we're working with. And we can do that through story. So giving them information is... We're not going to connect with the community, with Iwi, with stakeholders internally and externally.

And I think if you can craft a story that can evoke the emotion that you really want, and possibly the behavior shift that we possibly want to see coming out. And I think also if we look through the way that Māori do this, they are able to take these complex things and just use a story and make it so much easier to connect with and understand. And I think that's why we decided that storytelling is gonna be one of the starting points for us. And I think we've seen it in the success case interviews as well, Michelle. If you can craft a good narrative, that will help you then get you through the organizational objectives that you're trying to reach. And it really becomes sort of a strategic tool, that you can put it in your toolkit and it really gets you to achieve the goals that you need. And I think, I think if I look at Waka Kotahi at a whole, we all need storytelling. We do it any day, everyday anyway, in our personal lives. If we're drinking a cup of tea or a cup of coffee, if you just reflect, we're sharing some sort of story.

So, I think it's just also trying to get our people to be more comfortable in sharing that. I think when you hear about storytelling, it sounds like it was once upon a time sort of thing. But if you can get people to actually say no, it's your everyday experiences that you can use, to get to a bigger point at the end of the day.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. And I think you've got an organisation with a lot of technical experts as well, right?

Stacie Swindon:
Yes.

Michelle Ockers:
And you've mentioned the cultural linkage, working with Iwi. So I think there's a couple of angles there as to the power of storytelling to improve people's ability to communicate, to achieve goals, which we'll circle back to. Marcus, when you were given the design brief and the requirements, what stood out for you on the brief you were given?

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah. Definitely the cultural piece. It was interesting to have a tailored build come across our desk around communication generally, because a lot of what we tend to tailor at RMIT Online, I guess, it's our wheelhouse technical skills. So digital and design. So business communication piece was interesting in as it was, but to then have stipulated that the importance of that Te Ao Māori cultural overlay throughout the course and embedded in the course, that was really interesting. And from my perspective, personally and professionally, that immediately took my interest and also helped me know straight away, I know who would be a great subject matter expert for this, in terms of Roxy.

Because I knew that she worked really well around that brief, having worked with her in a previous role. So yeah, the cultural piece was great. The way that the entire course was build, around those key Māori values. And I said, in our conversation, pre-ambling this podcast, with Sean and Stacie, we talked about the fact that, we often think this stuff is cutting edge. We've got amazing international speakers and writers like Brené Brown, who talk about empathy and talk about engagement with others and active listening and the importance of vulnerability. That stuff has been embedded in traditional indigenous wisdom

for thousands, tens of thousands of years. And to see it here embedded within a business communication program was really exciting.

Michelle Ockers:
It's kind of what makes us human, right? All that stuff.

Marcus Garrett:
Exactly, yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
At some point we kind of lost the connection with that and felt we had to do business communication in a different way.

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah, that's right.

Michelle Ockers:
From just Human to human communication. So we're bringing a lot of that back in here. Stacie, can you talk to us a bit about, Marcus mentioned values or principles, what was the Te Ao Māori perspective that was brought to the program? And then we can talk about how that was woven into the program.

Stacie Swindon:
Sure. So as Marcus mentioned around the values, there were four main values that were pulled through throughout the course. So the first one was really around ngākau aroha. This is not only just a company value, it's one of the Māori values and it really talks about having heart and that empathy, as Marcus has mentioned. And when you look at the course, we looked at it around how can you actually apply the skill of active listening, listening to other people's stories that they're sharing. Listen with respect and empathy and just, I think, it encapsulates that whole, just be a good human, just be caring. And then going on to that, we have manaakitanga and this really shows the process of showing respect, generosity and just the care for others.

And it's really around share... When people are sharing these stories with you as well, it's show the respect and compassion that they need if they're sharing a very personal story. And it's just holding people to an account, basically. And then we have whanaungatanga, and that speaks to the relationships that we form, be it through people in work externally. And it really just talks about forming those relationships through shared experiences and working together to provide the best outcomes for everybody involved.

It also talks about a sense of belonging, and I think in this cohort whanaungatanga, that's what you want. You want to be able to feel connected to the group that you're going through. I know that there are elements where people do share their stories, and people won't share personal stories if they don't feel that they belong. And I think that's something that really set this group up for success, is that everybody connected so well. And then the final one is around kotahitanga, and this speaks to unity. And we wanted our people to be able to have the ability to tell their stories effectively, come together and really build strong partnerships. And I think the value of storytelling is that when you go from this program, you will have then the skills to be able to do that. And I think it's quite important that when we are dealing, especially with external people, when you put these four values into practice, you're gonna set yourself up for success. Because this just shows the amount of care, and the connections that we really want to have with the community that we want to serve.

Michelle Ockers:
So Marcus, how were they... Well, either the values themselves or just Te Ao Māori generally, how was that woven into design? Because it's really, one of the things I really respect about how the Waka Kotahi learning and development team approaches Te Ao Māori is it's never a bolt-on, it's not an add-on. It's an integral part of the design and development process and the learner experience on a program. So how was it woven into the design in this case?

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah. So I think probably the best way to explain this, to talk about, Claudia introduced us to this concept of a thousand cups of tea. And that's around, when you're working with someone, when you're starting out a new project with someone, getting to know them is about sitting down and having a thousand cups of tea first. And when I listened to that, it really... I was reminded of a little bit of work that I've done in a previous role with the Department of Education Training in Victoria here, where we had an aboriginal advisor. And she talked about relationships on a shared project being like making a pizza and making sure that we got the base right first. And that base was the relationships and the sharing and the time that we spend getting to know one another, personally and professionally before we really started the work.

And so those themes of building trust, listening to people with empathy and without judgment, they were woven throughout the whole storytelling development process throughout each of the four modules and there were underlying themes. When the assessment came around and people were developing their assessment, part of that assessment was, in fact, we want to see that you are doing some active listening before you present your own story. So it wasn't just about write a story and present it to your peers, in some form of presentation. It was about, first let's see that you've got the skill to be able to listen to others with empathy, then we'll have a look at your work around, presenting your own story.

Michelle Ockers:
And so, I'm gonna skip a little bit over kind of delivery. I am curious about the learner experience. But, what I really want to make sure we cover off is both the learner experience and because the micro-credentialing at the end of the day is about the credibility of the assessment process, and what you achieve with application through the assessment process. I'd like to go on to the assessment process then. Stacie, can you talk to us about the learner experience? Can you describe for someone who's undertaking this particular communication with storytelling, micro-credential, what that learner experience was like end to end?

Stacie Swindon:
So starting off, we basically made sure that when people registered or signed up for it, that they were very clear around the expectations. So the clear cut expectations was that it was gonna be 25 hours spread over six weeks, and that there was going to be time for them to prepare an assessment that they're going to need to submit. I think the content was divided over four modules and that each module would have specific activities or milestones that they would need to achieve. Part of that is while there was mentor check-in sessions or we call them, webinars, and Ben, shout out to Ben, who is... That's always been great feedback around him. He was the course mentor, and he would really come and expand on what are the topics, give the group an opportunity to ask any questions, review any activities, that were outstanding or coming up, and really prepare them for the final assessment that they would need to submit. There was also a Slack channel that was open for the cohort to use.

So if there was any activities, there would be a call to say, go and post your feedback now on the Slack channel. And that's just to create that peer to peer conversation. And then there was obviously two check-in sessions with the mentor, I think in week three and week four, just so that if they've had any final questions for the assessment that Ben would able to support them.

Michelle Ockers:
They were individual check-in sessions with the mentor?

Stacie Swindon:
Yes, those were individual check-in sessions. And then the participant could then be able say, here's my story, and he would give feedback to say, okay, maybe tweak this a little bit or focus more on this. So that when they did submit, that they knew exactly they were achieving what was in the rubric. And yeah, then I would submit the final assessment and then receive the credential.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. As you're talking about that, Stacie, that learner experience, I'm kind of linking it back to those four values that you spoke about before and this idea of, the sense of belonging, building the relationships. There's lots of human to human touchpoints in that learner experience, right?

Stacie Swindon:
Yes.

Michelle Ockers:
With the mentor, as a group, as individuals. Because of course, the core content delivery was online, online modules, but then you had these connection points and the peer support. So it was kind of very authentic and true to the values that you had adopted for the design as well. How was the... Like I just want to touch on, because I just think it was so beautifully done, visually and with the some of the videos and so on. And we got lots of good feedback on, from an evaluation perspective. I saw lots of good feedback on the way Te Ao Māori was positioned right up front in the introduction. So if there's anything you want to talk a little bit more about, how Te Ao Māori was approached in terms of the kind of the visual design, some of the asset creation and so on.

Marcus Garrett:
I can talk about that from an instructional design piece. So we had Kate from Antel, worked with us as our instructional designer, and she also worked closely with both Claudia and Roxy. So I can't stress too much how that working relationship between those three professional people was important. And then what Kate was able to do was create these lovely little animation graphics that visually exemplified some of the concepts that were being presented in each module. So there were these lovely cartoon like animations that reflected that. There were video pieces that we had custom made. We had an industry partner, Merkel, who they have a branch in New Zealand.

So we had an industry expert from Merkel who was able to talk about business communication. But I think what was even more valuable, as valuable as that was, was we had Claudia and other people from Waka Kotahi also videoed to talk about their perspectives in presenting each of those concepts, module by module in videos as well. So there was videos embedded, so that people could understand from a conversation perspective what those concepts meant.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah, touch points throughout. You've both talked about other people and organizations that were involved in design. So there's obviously strong partnerships across multiple organizations. And from memory, I think this was built in... Was it 12 weeks from project kick-off to completion of all of the assets and approval?

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
When you think about it, there are a lot of parts to bring together. What made the partnership work well? What made for a good set of working relationships in this case? We might start with you, Stacie, on that. What was that experience like and what enabled so many different groups to come together and for you to work with so many different groups, to put this program together in such a short space of time?

Stacie Swindon:
Well, I think definitely having the people who are committed to see this through, I think having a good project team to be able to push and say, keep us on track, to say we need to do this now. And then, I would say, though, something as a reflection, if you do want to do this properly and you do want to incorporate Te Ao Māori throughout your process, 12 weeks is not ideal because in a Te Ao Māori world-view, a lot more conversations need to be had and it's not actually done virtually. Māori enjoy the face-to-face connections. So if you want to do this properly, understand that it might take a little bit longer than the 12 weeks. We were just very lucky that Claudia was able to do it as well as she did in the time frame. But just think it's around having the right people and the right partner. And being able to clear the way to get things done at speed.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. From your perspective, Marcus, what made the partnership work well, either with Waka Kotahi, or with some of your other organizations, you had to partner with and bring on to the project?

Marcus Garrett:
We have an amazing project manager in our team, Rachel, who honestly would be probably the best project manager I've ever worked with. And she has this lovely, gentle way of keeping people on track. She was acutely conscious of the pressures of trying to keep to a tight deadline, but at the same time trying to make sure that that cultural conversation could continue in as natural way as possible. So that was quite a deadline to work to, but quite a tight rope to walk as well. So I think that was really important. I think the right subject matter expert and cultural advisor and I guess the goodwill that both those people brought to the project as well as our instructional designer, Kate, and the way in which she felt so comfortable going back to myself and to Roxy and to Claudia and saying, "Just checking this, is this right? Can you double check that I've interpreted this correctly?" because of course, you can describe something in a storyboard and in consultation, but the way it looks on the page and the way it engages the learner on a digital page can often translate quite differently. So I think that communication piece was really important too.

Michelle Ockers:
It's really ironic when I think about it now. It actually literally took us months to find the right partner for this work. And part of that challenge was the contextualisation, which was

predominantly Te Ao Māori. But to find an organization that was a provider, that it wasn't just about, well, we've got this course on the shelf and you can do this micro-cred, and was willing to really work with the organization around the contextualisation. And making sure that the assessment requirements, which we're going to go on to now, were relevant to the organization, so that people could feel like I really had an opportunity to use this in my job, to develop confidence and to show what I could do. So Marcus, let's talk about the assessment requirements and the assessment process.

Marcus Garrett:
So we started with both the goals or intended objectives and those Te Ao Māori values. That was our starting point for assessment design, which was really, really, important, and from there we then said, "Okay, what's going to demonstrate that these particular outcomes are going to be met once learners have completed the course." We then described... It ended up being a couple of tasks that learners would demonstrate. So firstly, being able to demonstrate the capacity to actively listen to someone around their personal story, and then to be able to put together their own story using the principles of storytelling that they had learned about throughout the course. We described that in a rubric, so that the rubric is then built out of those outcomes. And in terms of this particular micro-credential learners either had demonstrated those requirements or not demonstrated, that can actually be quite confronting to learners because they feel like they've got to get 100%. But it's more, look, you've either demonstrated in full or you haven't. And if you haven't, we always give learners another chance to come with really detailed feedback from the assessment mentor.

So wherever learners didn't meet, demonstrate those requirements in the first instance, the mentor would then provide them with detailed written feedback and then have a chat to them and say, you still need to do this. And they can resubmit to get that right the second time around. That whole assessment design base, including the rubric and the outcomes get submitted to improve by our, as I said, our university credentialing committee. And then from there we've got a university recognized digital badge and qualification that people are issued around that particular place.

Michelle Ockers:
So there's a level of rigour around it. People know right up front what's gonna be required and they can work on the project as they go along.

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah, that's right.

Michelle Ockers:
And then submit it.

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah. So I think what I think what was important was good design, clarity for learners was really important. And that's one of the learnings we can talk about in a minute, that clarity for learners. As we reiterated at the course in the second cohort, and then a really well trained mentor who was able to provide that detailed feedback.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. And as the evaluator, so I stepped back once you guys all got introduced and you started on the design project. I stepped back and then just focused on evaluation of the program as it was a pilot, a little more effort was gonna be put into evaluation. So let's talk a little bit about the evaluation and what came out of the evaluation and then you've run a

second cohort, so what was changed for the second cohort? So with the evaluation process the approach was this is about continuous improvement. It's not about needing to gather evidence to demonstrate that it worked. It was really about looking at what was working, what wasn't working, how can we improve. And of course, we did some surveys along the way, a couple of pulse surveys during the program delivery, so we could pick up on things early and adjust if need be.

And then after people had an opportunity to complete their applications through the assessment process, we did an application survey, and we also surveyed some of the managers to see what they had seen shift. We did focus groups and then from that, because we really wanted to be able to understand not only what had people done, but how had it impacted their work, we did something called success case interviews. This is one of those kind of skills and I think a lot of what traditionally called soft skills, Stacie, you talked about power skills. Particularly as one of the goals of the pilot was to ensure that we had people from a whole range of different parts of the organization doing the micro-credential, so we could check, is this something that's going to be broadly applicable across the organization rather than specific to one team or one role.

It was really hard to predefine, here's how this skill will be used because it's such a flexible skill, right? It can be used in so many ways. So rather than try to say, here's specific impacts or business outcomes we're looking for, we had a general idea of that, but we really used, in particular the success case interviews. Which were informed by what we saw out of the assessment, who'd done a good job at applying. And we dug deep, I think we did about, was it eight success case interviews, Stacie? Does that sound right?

Stacie Swindon:
Yes.

Michelle Ockers:
And we did them twice. We did them, I think around about six weeks after the end of the course. And then we went back a couple of months later to the same people, and we asked them about how have you applied the skills from the course. We got them to dig deep into one specific example. And what has this meant for you? What's the result of that? What have you been able to achieve? That was such a powerful process, Stacie, what we saw coming out of that. And it just made me think just even generally, sometimes because we don't go back and ask, we don't see the impact of our work in learning and development.

Stacie Swindon:
Yes.

Michelle Ockers:
So at any point, and not necessarily just the success case interviews, but what were the key things that stood out for you, Stacie, with evaluation of this program? What did you see, what needed to maybe be acted on to course correct, or what were maybe some of the really delightful surprises that stumbled upon in the evaluation process?

Stacie Swindon:
So I think firstly, Michelle, that the whole process has been an eye opener for me. So thank you for being part of that. I think it's interesting how people, especially in poll surveys, how they interpret the questions. And then you think, "Oh, we've got a problem here." And then you discuss it in the focus group and you realize, "Actually, we don't have a problem here."

So I think that having that is not just relying on one source of truth. It's having different touch points, I think is something that I've learned is quite important.

And I think also showing that when learning, when people have found learning interesting, or I can actually apply back into my work, I was thinking, "Okay, we are going off in December. Everyone's gonna forget what they've learned." But coming back in February when we had that second interview for the success case stories and people were still continuing to share what they've learned and what they've been able to apply was refreshing. So I think it is that, it's just, it takes a couple of minutes of your day. So follow up and see how have you been doing this or having that conversation. And sometimes people don't actually realize that they're doing it. So when they are able to have that discussion with you, you can possibly help them along to see that they are actually applying what they've learned.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah.

Stacie Swindon:
So I think that's been really valuable for me.

Michelle Ockers:
Evaluation can also help to reinforce and remind and nudge people, and I think that's what we saw as well. It was really interesting how things had evolved with people's practice, with using storytelling and communication, in that period of time between the two lots of touch points, those two success case interviews. What we heard a lot in the first round of success case interviews was, to your point, Marcus, around the active listening skills. That was the kind of the easiest and most comfortable part of application, and perhaps it was the early part of the program as well. So people had had more time to practice that. We had a couple of just brilliant quick stories and examples come out.

One person in the training team, who I'm not even gonna go through the story, but it was just brilliant to... Basically she'd accidentally removed her eyebrows instead of bleaching them. And she used that as a story in customer service training which was just brilliant. And that came out of the first round of success case interviews, but it really wasn't until the second round of success case interviews that the majority of the people that we interviewed were actually getting really comfortable with and starting to use storytelling in very powerful ways. So it takes time, it takes practice, but I think if you can nudge. The learning's not over when the course is delivered or even the assessment is done right, it's still about providing some sort of nudging and support and reinforcement, can really help.

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
Marcus, what did you take away from the evaluation process? Was there anything that really stood out for you? Not necessarily about the process itself, but in terms of as the course, you know, as part of the course design?

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah, absolutely. There were three, from the first evaluation, from the first cohort. There were three key areas that that we were able to identify. And you talked about continuous improvement, and that's absolutely why I found that process so valuable for us. Those three areas were firstly the assessment design. Because we did want to collect evidence of both

that active listening component, but also the capacity of people to then craft and tell their stories, we had bundled that together in one assessment piece to be delivered at the end of the project. And that was tricky for learners. They found that recording a part where they're actively listening, and then jumping into their story was complicated and awkward for them. So the first learning was, let's actually pull those assessment components apart. And so in the second iteration, we were able to have a milestone early in the course around active listing that was formally accessible, and then separate that from the actual storytelling piece for the people.

Michelle Ockers:
Yep.

Marcus Garrett:
And that seemed to have been addressed in the second cohort in terms of evaluation. So people didn't raise that as an issue and it seemed to run smoothly. The second piece was around the timing of our weekly webinars. People often found that because they were busy and the way that they managed their time didn't always work out for that webinar to be at the end of the week and to be summative, they preferred it to be at the beginning of the week and to be formative, in other words, for the mentor to explain what was coming in the module.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah.

Marcus Garrett:
That way people didn't feel bad when they turned up to the webinar and they hadn't done all the reading or they hadn't done... So we actually moved the webinar and changed the structure of the course in the second cohort. And then lastly, it was just the sheer volume of content. We've obviously got a large amount of content around business communication, but also the really lovely deep and rich content around Māori cultural content as well. There's a lot in the course, a lot.

And we actually decided to keep that in the second cohort just simply because... And we restructured the way we organized that content, but we kept the volume there. And interesting, when learners were still staying at the end of the second cohort, that was a lot of content. So perhaps a key learning might be for the future we might extend the course for a bit longer, for example, so that we don't have to do away with any of the content. Or do something to consolidate the content in some way.

Michelle Ockers:
Yep. So continuing to fine-tune. So Stacie, I would just want to touch back on those success case stories because they're not only something that you can use for evaluation purposes, but they do have other users. And of course we wrote up each person's story with their permission. How have they been used?

Stacie Swindon:
So there's been a couple of ways so far. So definitely shout out to Murray. He's been my star student and star learner. So we've been able to use the story. I actually got him to come and share his story with the second cohort, share his learning journey as well, his experience. Because he was the type of learner that he just followed the instructions and went through the milestones and was able to actually just do everything on time. So that was one way.

And actually coming into the second cohort, he had a couple more stories to share, from the previous conversations that myself and you had Michelle with him.

And we've also been able to link some of the stories back to show the impact back into Tā Tātou Rautaki Akoranga, which is our learning strategy. And I'm going to be using them now as well for a wider awareness piece around micro-credentials and the impact that it can actually have. And I think especially in our context where technical skills are a priority, we want to be able to show that, hey, power skills or soft skills, or human skills, however you want to call them, actually also do have an impact. So that's how we're gonna be using the success case stories.

Michelle Ockers:
Fantastic. And from an organisational perspective then, in terms of thinking this micro-credentials could be a game changer, what have we learned about the value of micro-credentials for Waka Kotahi, as opposed to just the value of a well-designed course?

Stacie Swindon:
I think it goes back into that credentialing, I think showing you've had to put on the work to be able to find that you've got the skill. So I think people now say, "Okay, so you've actually got the skill, you should be flexing that now." We have had storytelling courses people have gone on, and we haven't been able to show that impact. And now with people who've actually had... I think it also... It's a confidence booster as well.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah.

Stacie Swindon:
I think people feel now that, "Oh, I've actually got this credential, so I really do have the skill, rather than I've been on this workshop, it's been great. I come back into the work context and it gets left behind, sort of thing." So I think that's how I see the value of micro-credentials.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. So it's actually about taking people further to application and performance, yeah?

Stacie Swindon:
Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. Did you want to add anything to that, Marcus?

Marcus Garrett:
No, only just to reiterate that embedding in work is... We really do learn by doing. So it's in that application piece that people, that's where the power and the money is.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. Absolutely. So tips for others who either might want to get started with micro-credentials or do more with micro-credentials. What tips would you have, Marcus?

Marcus Garrett:
Yeah. The first thing I would encourage people to do is have a good look at their organisational strategy and what their goals are there. Because the first question that we will

ask is, what are the business objectives? What does success look like for you? That's really important because that's where the design piece starts. So being able to think about what do you want to achieve. Which parts of your team these skills are an absolute priority for, not trying to do everything all at once.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah.

Marcus Garrett:
Often we'll have clients coming to us and they say, "Here's our capability framework, and what can you... How can you align all these capabilities around a couple of micro-credentials?" And of course, that's not always possible because there's such a broad range of skills that they want to achieve. So I think looking at your priorities, thinking about your business strategy upfront, asking yourself the question, what is it that we don't know? What is it that we don't know we don't know? And really thinking about what you want to achieve and coming into the design process with that front of mind, is probably the key piece of advice I'd give clients.

Michelle Ockers:
Great. Thank you. And as an organization using micro-credentials, Stacie, what would your tips be to others?

Stacie Swindon:
I think definitely exactly what Marcus has said. And really doing some discovery work around what is currently on the shelf. Is it going to actually achieve what we want? And deciding I can use this one that's just straight off the shelf or when it's time to actually then partner with credible people.

Michelle Ockers:
Yeah. Great. Thank you. All good advice. So I'm going to pop links to both of your LinkedIn profiles in the show notes, if anyone would like to get in touch with you. And we'll also add links, both of you have done call outs to a number of other people. So what I'd like to do is to honor that and grab... I'll work with you to grab their LinkedIn profiles and make sure we put them in. I hadn't realized how many related podcast episodes I'd done around this topic, so it was really nice to see them coming together. So they'll be in the links, some of those will be in the podcast show notes as well.

Thank you so much, Stacie and Marcus. It was an absolute joy to work with both of you on this project and thank you so much for coming and sharing your insights with us and with all of our listeners today. It's much appreciated.

Stacie Swindon:
Thanks Michelle.

Marcus Garrett:
You're welcome Michelle. Yeah. Thank you. And likewise.

Stacie Swindon:
Yeah. Thanks Marcus.

Marcus Garrett:
Thanks.

Michelle Ockers:
Okay. Shall we close with a Karakia, Stacie?

Stacie Swindon:
Thanks Michelle. So the Karakia that I'm gonna be closing off talks about that restrictions are moved aside. We are setting a path for clearance and we can return now to everyday activities.

Kia whakairia te tapu
Kia wātea ai te ara
Kia turuki whakataha ai
Kia turuki whakataha ai
Haumi e. Hui e. Tāiki e!

About Learning Uncut

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

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

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

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

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