

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to episode 137 of Learning Uncut. This is our end of year wrap for our regular episodes. And I'm just delighted to have long-time friend of the podcast and fantastic collaborator, Laura Overton, joining me for this episode. Hi, Laura.

Laura Overton:

Hi, I am so thrilled to be here. What a year.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes, we get to the end of every year and we say it was a really interesting year. I think it's been the first kind of solid year since post-COVID. I want to say it's a year since we got back into conferences properly. I feel better connected than I have since COVID hit. So what a year. Where did that come from?

Laura Overton:

Well, I think just that there's been so much change going on in the world when we thought there couldn't be any more change that could go on in the world.

Michelle Ockers:

And then we just need to shift that belief, right?

Laura Overton:

Absolutely, absolutely. And it's just been really exciting to see so much development in learning and development as we've been kind of progressing through this year, as we've kind of literally been emerging from the pandemic and into this kind of post-pandemic world. I think it's been a really exciting time for us and like you, such a joy to do so much travelling now and actually to see people and to meet people and to feel their experiences, not just hear about it. I think that's been really good.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's been a bonus for the podcast as well, because I haven't had to work quite as hard to find more great stories to bring to everyone. It was a little harder when I wasn't at face to face events for a couple of years. So, Laura, the podcast has now been going for five and a half years. launched in June, 2018. We've got over 206, well, we've got 206 episodes, including this one out now, which includes not just the main series, but during COVID of course, I ran a rapid series called Disruption, one episode a day for 15 days of things that L&D practitioners might need to do or scale up. as a result of the rapid shifts due to closures and lockdowns worldwide at the start of the pandemic, then you and Shannon join me for another special series called the Emergent Series. And we actually ran two of those, Laura, over time.

Laura Overton:

Absolutely. And your podcast is such a great way of exploring, exploring new ideas and exploring what's going on. So for me, you know, just taking part in them, So listening to them as well is just so much insight.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, it's a great way to reach out and find out what people are actually working on doing, activating in response to shifts. And of course, I've got the Elevate series, which I've recently reinvigorated, which is all about focusing in on one practice or a research report or one something that L&D professionals can take away and apply to increase their impact and improve their practice. So for the main series, and today we're really Laura, we're just going to be focusing on what I like to call the case study episodes, the real spine of the whole podcast series, where I reach out and talk to an L&D professional about something they've done in their work, maybe a new approach, a specific learning solution, something they've applied, be it something more traditional done well or something a little bit more cutting edge, and we really dig into that. So, all up, we've had 136 of those. So, this year, we went from episode 115 through to 136, so a little over 20. of those episodes this year, and we've reached 147,000 downloads total for the podcast across 125 countries, which has exceeded my wildest expectations of the reach we could have with the podcast.

Laura Overton:

And also, it's not just that reach, it's the way that you're impacting people around the globe as well, because obviously, you know, I talk about the podcast, I talk about the case studies and the number of people I meet, Michelle, on my side of the world, to listen and really enjoy the practical advice that you and your guests have been sharing. It really is a phenomenal reach that you've had in the last five and a half years.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, 11% of our downloads are from the UK. So we've got 40% from Australia, 20% from the US, 5% of New Zealand and the rest spread over the other 121 countries. And, you know, it doesn't happen without the guests. And I'm just continuously impressed and grateful for the, you know, the open nature, the curiosity, the willingness that people working in L&D have to share their practice and to learn from each other and lean into those spaces. It's fantastic. So Laura, and I know you're a keen one for curiosity and leaning in. So what we're going to do today is you and I are going to have a little bit of a chat because, you know, 10 different L&D professionals could listen to all of this year's podcasts and all take away something slightly different. It's like going to a conference where there's multiple streams, you bring your own perspective and your own experience to the table when you listen to these podcast stories. So I want to spend just a little bit of time for the two of us to talk about some of our professional highlights and what might be shaping our thinking so people have that, I guess, take on the lenses we're bringing to this conversation. I want to talk a little bit broadly around what we're seeing happening in learning and development and the kind of shifts we're seeing in L&D this year, and then we can move into the podcast with that as context. So what's the you know, what have the highlights been for you this year, Laura? Some of the key highlights that, you know, maybe things you've worked on or development

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

experiences, community activities, things you might have been reading, watching, learning conversations. What's been shaping your professional year?

Laura Overton:

Oh, my goodness. You've only got a short podcast here, so I'll try and keep it brief. OK. I think I guess this year has been really shaped by the fact that it's actually 20 years since I started researching why learning and development struggles to embrace the new and how high performing teams kind of really drive impact. So this has been a kind of, I guess it's been a driver for those 20 years, but hitting a 20 year milestone, Michelle, is actually, it's a bit scary to be doing 20 years of any one thing. So it's been a really amazing year for reflection, You know, obviously, I run the Learning Changemakers program, which is about encouraging exploration, encouraging change, and, you know, working together. So I think my year has been really divided into how we look back and learn from the past, and how we continue to explore into the future. So the sorts of things I've been doing, I designed and co-hosted an impact lab with an amazing woman called Bo Durie, from La Paya where we started to rethink impact. We used to deconstruct it and look at what it is that we struggle with and what we don't struggle with and what that holistic process is. And I think that's an example of some of that kind of holistic deconstructing work I've been doing in my work. I've been actively involved in awards, the Culture Pioneer Awards, the Learning Technology Awards, which all links into exploration. I'm a researcher. I explore. I did a major study Again, over the last 20 years, I've been working with a lot of the institutes for our industry, amazing people. And it was a real privilege to go back to the CIPD and do a study with over 1,200 people to look at how learning and development has shifted in the last couple of years. And so this year I've been taking a little bit of my own medicine as well and I have been moving into a doctorate program as well, which involves a lot of letting go of your previous preconceptions and bringing new thinking into your work. So that has been really powerful for me and also the other way I've been bringing in new thinking is I've been working a lot through my sounding board activity that I do and just the way I've been connecting with learning leaders. really exciting works that they're doing and bringing fresh thinking into our amazing industry.

Michelle Ockers:

So, and that's just a little bit, I feel like we could have a whole hour talking about all the stuff that Laura's been doing. And I've watched from a distance.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, but what about you? I know you've been just as busy though, that's the thing. You've done even more than I have.

Michelle Ockers:

Oh, different things. We come at impact differently. And I think the thing that first drew us together was your research around impact. But it's working through tools like strategy, through looking at enabling technology, underlying that strategy through team structures and the network that you work with inside the organization. the L&D team skill sets, and more recently, end-to-end workflow, helping an L&D team at the moment to create all of their processes, tools, and templates for their end-to-end workflow in a really integrated way. It's so interesting. The other thing I

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

got back into this year was a bit of mentoring of individual L&D leaders. And the stuff that they're wanting the mentoring on or the goals that they nominate for mentoring, it's all about building their influence, building relationships so they can have more impact. It's not necessarily the technical skills. It's all of the sort of things we leaned into with that last Emerging Stronger series or the last Emergent Podcast series about taking bold action, Laura. I think it really resonates with people. and is a much needed area of skill development for L&D leaders. Did you want to comment on that at all? I can see you sitting there wanting to comment.

Laura Overton:

I just find that so encouraging. I find that so encouraging because it was a characteristic of those high performing teams, the way we connect, the way we engage, the way we work with. And also, I think it's been a really interesting theme for all of this year as well. I'm super interested. Maybe we can explore that a little bit later in the conversation.

Michelle Ockers:

We'll see if it comes up or how it shows itself. Of course, there were lots of conferences for me, LTUK at the start of May. I went to the Association for Talent Development Conference in the US at the end of May, and then three conferences back here in Australia. And through these events, I've met some amazing people, many of whom have become podcast guests. And of course, for any listeners of the podcast, you'll probably be aware that I relaunched the Business Learning Uncut earlier this year with my new co-founder, Ravina Bhatia, and really enjoying working alongside her on, you know, building skills and some of the other strategic work that we do that I mentioned earlier. And of course, in terms of what have what's been big in L&D and what have people been leaning into, Every conference, AI has been a key area of interest. And it's just been interesting to follow the way in which people are leaning into AI. Certainly when we get together in professional gatherings, if I contrast the way people were kind of It was almost, clamoring probably isn't quite the right word, but just trying to get to grips with what, at LTUK in early May, what is this AI thing? How does it work? What do we know about it? Oh, I'm a little bit scared about it, but I'm curious as well. It was such a hot topic and I've just kind of seen that settle a little bit as people get their heads around it and better quality examples come out and people get a little bit better educated about it and organizations start to look at what it means for them. What's your sense of the shift in our relationship with AI and L&D this year?

Laura Overton:

Well, it's certainly been a word. just sum up the year. Yes, that's for sure is that AI is definitely out there. But yeah, like you, I've been at different conferences and been watching on social media and been engaging and thinking about this as well. But it's been a real roller coaster ride, literally a roller coaster ride. You know, what is it you've got the, you know, those in the industry who are hungry to see this new thing and what it can do for us. And we've seen so many incredible insights about its power. But as that year has progressed, as you say, they've been questioned. And in the same way as the year has progressed in society where they are, you've got the accelerators and you've also got the doomers out there as well. And, you know, just the tumultuous shifts in the voices that are coming together. And certainly even in

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

Berlin last week, when I was at the Online Educa Conference, You know, this debate continues. This debate continues about how valuable it will be and how we need to be prepared for the good and the bad in our industry moving forward. And that's good. It's good for us to debate, but it's also good for us to be smart in the way that we apply these technologies to ourselves and also to our work. And I think, you know, there are no experts in this field right now. We're all explorers. We're all travelers. We're all moving together and needing to learn as much from each other as we do from the system itself.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So I feel like AI, it has to be acknowledged that it's a key area of interest at the moment, as it would be to most professional bodies. I think last year, 2022, skills was the big hot topic. And if you'd ask anyone what's capturing everybody's attention, it would have been skills. So outside of AI, if you had to sum up L&D in 2023 in a word or phrase, what would it be and why?

Laura Overton:

I hope you don't mind me bringing this word up, Michelle, but I do get a sense of L&D being overwhelmed. And I'll tell you why I choose that word. It's coming through in the data, certainly in the CIPD report, but also the Mind Tool for Business report, which is the other, obviously the longitudinal study that I've been involved with for so many years. But this year, our workload and our expectations are really increasing. We saw little bits of budget increase, headcount increase in some of the data coming through here. So in theory, everything's kind of stabilizing. But we saw a net increase in workload of 45% in this year's kind of reporting. And I think that this sense of being overwhelmed is not just about workload. It's about how do we respond to the change in the marketplace at the moment? How do we respond to the new tools and the new technologies? How do we respond to the skills issues? Because I think you're absolutely right, the skills issues are there. They are as important now. How do we gain, retain the right talent, the right skills, and all of those kinds of things into our space? But also, I think the other thing that's really kind of adding to our sense of being overwhelmed is us learning to shift how we need to do our role. I think more people are aware of that now, but it's not necessarily kind of coming through in our practice. So we're kind of stuck between the past and the demand. And so for me, I think it's an important time to recognise our own mental health, our own opportunity to be able to contribute value back into the industry as we move into next year. Because I do think this year has been a year of being just overwhelmed potentially as an industry. I don't know, how do you feel about that comment, Michelle?

Michelle Ockers:

No, look, I think that's a very fair comment. And when I think about the work I do, which is largely around working with L&D teams about, you know, developing their strategy, looking at, you know, how do they figure out what they should be working on, where to focus their energies, people have tough time figuring that out. How do we prioritize between the many different things that we could be working on in the business and the many different requests when we only have a certain capacity? And it's interesting you're saying that budgets have increased. My sense towards the back end of the year, just working with clients is I'm hearing a lot more in Australia anyway, that budgets are getting tighter, particularly for those in government. We've

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

had some government changes at state level here. New Zealand's had a government change. So there's always things that are thrown into a bit of uncertainty. I note the LinkedIn workplace learning report, which was published early in 2023, the budget forecast there remained pretty strong at the time. So there were only 8% of the L&D professionals who were interviewed for or surveyed for that particular piece of research who were expecting budgets to decrease. And yet you contrast that with the leadership report put out in early 2023 by Mind Tools for Business, where they go out and talk to business leaders about their priorities and expectations. And they found that the leaders' priorities weren't as clearly defined as they had been in 2021, which is the last time they did that research. And I think there was a sense of an economic slowdown coming. And we have certainly seen that happen. 47% of business leaders in that piece of research said they wanted to reduce operational costs. And I think partly because of mixed signaling from our business leaders, it can be a little harder to figure out where to focus and how to create the most impact. So that's sort of my take from a practitioner's perspective on what's going on.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, absolutely. And we do need to be aware of the bigger context that we're working in. Often when we talk as learning professionals, we talk about ourselves to each other about what we do. But actually, when we do look at the wider kind of commercial and public sector environments that we're working in, the kind of being overwhelmed, the complexity that we are facing is as a result of the complexity and the changing issues that our workplaces are facing as well. And so, you know, we talk a lot about alignment in the industry. We have done and I don't know about you, Michelle, but that alignment word has come up time and time and time again. So, yes, I do think that this is an important word for us. But I think the other word for me this year that's kind of really risen to the surface is this word of complexity, understanding that there's not just a straight line. If we do this, and work our way through change management and implementing a new strategy and da, da, da, da, da, da, that we'll actually get to the result that everyone thinks we're gonna need. We are working in complex, entangled worlds where individuals, managers, teams, the environment that we're in, any one of those could shift the ground that we're walking on at any one point in time. And any small thing that we could do could either go down well, or it could just be ignored because of everything else. And I think we've never been more aware of that complexity as we have this year. And I think that's a really important aspect for us to maybe be thinking about when we kind of look at the past year and moving forward into next year.

Michelle Ockers:

And I think just sort of underscores the importance of our relationships across the business and the value of those, not only to make sure we're working on the right things and we're supporting our business leaders to achieve goals that matter to them, even as those goals are shifting and we have to shift with them, but also cross-functionally and working more cross-functionally. And I think that might be a nice point to kind of move into what we saw in the podcast episodes this year. And of course, I will flag because the podcast episodes do lag a little bit the current work that L&D people are doing, of course, because the stories that we bring to the podcast, the case studies are things that have been implemented and shown some

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

sort of business impact. So a lot of the work we feature is work that was maybe done, you know, at best six months ago, maybe 12 months ago, 18 months ago. So there is a little bit of a lag. But nonetheless, I think it's really nice to think about, well, what have we seen across the episodes this year? And I'm just going to kick off with one observation and then I'll see what else you would like to add to that mix, Laura. And that is, I think if we think back over the past, well, it's one year's worth of podcast, but a body of work that probably started 18 months to 24 months ago for a lot of the people I've spoken to this year. I think people are thinking about workplace application and behavior change a lot more than they used to. And I think the shift to getting people more comfortable with participating in virtual learning, online learning, getting them out of classrooms and more comfortable with blended learning programs, which use a mix of different approaches, including approaches to support practice and application in the workplace. and, you know, spread over time. I see that coming through in a lot of the high quality case studies that we see. For example, we spoke with Simon Jobson at Sydney Trains about a customer service program called Elevate that they rolled out for their, literally their frontline staff on the stations. And it was very well thought out in terms of, you know, before, during and after activities, very carefully designed and supported. They got everyone to set goals after the actual one-day face-to-face event. Everybody had a lapel pin, which they actually found out the staff valued and wanted. It wasn't something they came up with on their own. And because people had a lapel pin, managers or people doing mystery shopping on their stations could actually see who had done the program and were able to ask them about it. And what have you done on your goals? And they had an app that they were tracking goals in, nudge based learning. So I think that was a really nice example amongst many other examples from the podcast of this shift to more carefully designed, longer programs that aim to support behavioral change and application. So that's my first aim in there.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, I would absolutely agree with you. I really, I really saw that. And I really valued it as well. This kind of that concept of kind of involving people in a longer process of behavior change, as well. And, you know, I think earlier in the year, you had a podcast recording with somebody was talking about their onboarding program, and it had gone from a two-day face-to-face, let's get you all onboarded into this kind of, I think it was a 12-week initiative of that process of working with you through your first three months in this organisation. And that is also a shift in behaviour, Michelle, that you were talking about there. It's not just that we're training initiatives, But the way that we're equipping and making people ready to do their job, we're recognizing. And I saw that it was a really nice example there in the onboarding program.

Michelle Ockers:

I think that was probably Anthea Peening back in episode 115 from Lion where they were, she was talking about their sales onboarding. And what was interesting about that as well, this was an interesting reflection of skills, right? And some of the talent shortages that organizations are grappling with, both partly by design because they wanted to get more diversity into their sales workforce, but also because they were having trouble recruiting people with sales experience and specifically with sales experience in the drinks industry that the company operates in. You know, they've had to take people, give people more time to develop skills. Think about how can we

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

support them better? And one of the nice things about that 12 weeks is that wasn't 12 weeks of, you know, e-learning modules and training session after training session. There was a lot of self-directed content, self-directed activities, things that people could go and do with their manager. We saw that as well in the ANZ Bank example, their branch banker onboarding, which was episode 123. Their whole construct about a learning day and what is a learning day, a learning day in their program is not just facilitated activities, but self-directed activities and application activities. And they provide the learners with almost like the equivalent of a facilitator's guide, a guide for them. Here's the construct of your day. And oh, there happens to be a 90 minute online session partway through the day. But here's all this other stuff that you're doing and the way we're connecting with you to support you. Really interesting, you know, fresh concepts and approaches being brought into some of these learning programs.

Laura Overton:

I think what you're saying is, yeah, they are fresh. But I think why they stood out for me when I was listening to these stories that you just described is because they are holistic. And the idea of us in our profession not just delivering programs and content and curricula, but actually enabling the holistic experience of the individuals. And it's marvellous to see how this is working out in today's fresh context. But it's actually a characteristic of high performing learning teams that have been there for literally the last 20 years. But now we have got the tools and the equipment and the ways to look at learning. And everyone that you've mentioned has flagged how we are thinking differently about our role, not as content deliverers or course deliverers or facilitators or trainers, but our role as enablers. And that was such a powerful thing. Now, I don't know it's whether it's because as a magnet, Michelle, you attract these kinds of people into your podcast. But, you know, from what I'm seeing over here in the UK, some really important things are seeing that shift over here as well. And it's one of the most exciting shifts I can think about, not just because it's fresh, But it's because it's embedded in really strong evidence-informed learning strategy.

Michelle Ockers:

Spot on. Spot on. You know, I'm just going to leap from that comment to the episode with Katrina Malcolm, Kat Malcolm from Westpac Bank, where she talked about something called design patterns for learning, which are not prescriptions, but here's a series of common problems and here's, you know, principles that you can apply to create a bespoke response to those. and recognizing that Westpac has decentralized their learning and development function and also that they have many people who aren't L&D professionals who are creating learning rather than fight that, they've lent into that. and created these design patterns. They're not so much design standards. Design standards are more things like what you would have in your style guide or, you know, standards around how e-learning needs to get developed and so on. But they're based on evidence around what works. So, one particular pattern is around every learning solution has to have the opportunity for practice and feedback. and being able to interpret that and apply that differently, but taking evidence-informed practice and making it accessible more broadly to people in the organization, no matter who is working on learning and development experiences. I really loved that conversation and the approach they've taken there.

Laura Overton:

I think the idea of principles is really something that jumped out at me as well. And it's been something that I've been looking at as a way of actually working through this complexity, because we do need to be flexible and we do need to be agile in this continually changing world. And, you know, where Westpac are using design principles, I was really interested as well in, I think it was the interview that you did with Di Hickman from the Australian Public Services Academy. I think it was episode 120. The thing that jumped out at me at that one as well was the fact that in the strategy, it was principles led. It wasn't just, you know, we're going to be able to do this for APS. And we're going to, you know, this is how we're going to do it. But it was the principles. I think there are a number of different action learning principles in their action pillars, I think she called it.

Michelle Ockers:

The principles and the pillars are different things. I know this body of work well because I helped Di with it.

Laura Overton:

Oh my god, yes of course, yes you did, you did.

Michelle Ockers:

And we pick up and use a lot of these approaches. The principles are like guidelines you can use to make consistent decisions, no matter who's making those decisions about learning and development. So, you know, we learn every day from our work is one example of the principle they've embraced.

Laura Overton:

What I noticed, though, was the lowercase p principles. The concept of principles also flowed over, not over just in the way that you set out how we're going to do this, but the action pillars as well. Yes. For example, in capability, the action pillar I was talking about, I think Di talked about the fact that you want to be capability agnostic. Wow. Powerful, powerful stuff. Because that's the principle we build. that was embedded within that action pillar that allows it to be flexible when things change.

Michelle Ockers:

That's right. So you can point yourself at any particular skill or area of capability the organisation needs. It's not like an operational plan, right?

Laura Overton:

Absolutely, absolutely. And this principles led in terms of, you know, giving out guidance. giving out, this is the way we do things around here and why we do it, so that it equips others to be able to be able to respond to change. So both in Westpac and with Di's work, these were the kind of things that were bubbling up to me that I thought have got incredible potential for the future and also to help us relieve the pressure on ourselves as well by equipping our teams, not just with very detailed models, but why we do what we do and how you can flex this when you're face-to-face with something that's changing.

Michelle Ockers:

And that's interesting, linking it back to the conversation we had around what are we seeing happening in organisations, in industry, what are we trying to support? And it's a moving feast. It gives you flexibility, right? So another episode around strategy and transformation that I just loved was episode 128 around AstraZeneca with Mark Howes, the VP of Global Talent and Development. Just as an interesting sidebar, that is the only episode I've recorded in five and a half years where two members of the comms team came and sat in on the recording, Laura. It was so fascinating.

Laura Overton:

No! So he towed the company line and he gave fabulous insights as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. And they just went off on the side. They went off camera. And I just said to them, if there's anything you don't like the way we're talking about it, just let us know. Come off camera and let us know because the editing gets too hard otherwise. But they didn't. They didn't. They were very happy with what Mark spoke about. But as a long term, and it really shows when you're seeking to really shift learning in an organization, even a small organization, it takes years. You really have to think long term about what are the shifts you're trying to create. And in the bigger organizations, those partnerships are everything. So one of the pieces of work that Mark talked about was moving from streamlining from 75 learning technologies down to just eight. And one of his key takeouts from that conversation was sometimes you have to go slow to go fast and to build support and buy-in for something so critical.

Laura Overton:

Yeah. And this idea of going slow to go fast and building shared language is a storyline that kind of went through quite a lot of the podcasts as well as this year. The fact that, you know, you've got to build up. And I mean, one example, there were two examples that kind of stood out for me with that. And one was Michelle and Kyle, when they were talking in episode 122.

Michelle Ockers:

Michelle and Kyle Hodler from Amazon Data Services, I want to say.

Laura Overton:

Yep. It was Amazon and Learning Lab with Kyle, I think, wasn't it? And I know that they were talking about the creative role of stories in helping people. It was a well-being initiative that they were doing, and they were using a great little tool that I know you and I both used. to help others capture their stories. But there was that, you know, linking into the point that you just made, Michelle, I think what stood out for me there was over time, by capturing other people's stories, I think they asked one simple question was, was there ever a time that you struggled? And how did you cope with that? You know, it's very simple, but it encouraged shared language. shared storytelling, shared spaces for telling stories, shared recognition, because everyone's struggle was treated with equity, whether you were senior in the organisation or whether you were just in the organisation. And that telling of stories with that common purpose is, again, exactly to your point that you're saying, is that change takes time. It takes time to shift language. It takes time to shift vocabulary.

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

And, you know, some of the people on your work on your podcast were really starting to kind of show us different little practical ways of being able to do that. I thought that that was a very powerful element, that it takes time. And the other one that stood out for me, may I have two in a row?

Michelle Ockers:

Yes, keep going, keep going.

Laura Overton:

Was episode 130 with Dustin at San Diego Zoo. you know, I love a good story from a not-for-profit organization.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a first not-for-profit story, would you believe? I realized when I was looking back, it's my first not-for-profit.

Laura Overton:

Yeah. We have to, next year we will have to change that. I do a lot of work with the Charity Learning Consortium over here in the UK.

Michelle Ockers:

Right, let's make sure we do.

Laura Overton:

And what I love, but what I love about not-for-profit organizations is that they just don't have as many resources people, time, money, anything, anything at all, technologies. So the creativity comes out. And I think Dustin really flagged that, the San Diego Zoo, when you're talking about the whole role of the zoo as being conservation and how he's working that. And he said something like, he said, when I came in, I had a lot of opportunity to sit back, listen, And I did a lot of living a day in the life of different individuals. Now that takes time, Michelle, that takes time for somebody to go in and to do that. But it comes back in shed loads when it comes down to building credibility, understanding the business, knowing how to work with people, not just working for people. And I thought that was a really, so many different examples that you gave during that interview of investing time in others, paying back. And I can't remember, Michelle, was he a one man band?

Michelle Ockers:

He is a one man band, yes, a one man L&D team.

Laura Overton:

So creative, so creative in the way that he applied his resources of himself to getting involved with the organization, really powerful stuff. But again, takes time to build change.

Michelle Ockers:

It does. And, you know, one of his challenges was there is no money for tech. So anything he does, he can't go and spend it on tech. But, you know, you can't expect and something you and I've talked about a lot. You can't expect tech to solve your

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

problems. And one of the things I loved, I did a story about a talent marketplace. And of course, talent marketplaces are one of the things that kind of hit us in, I think, 2022, but not many people have actually implemented them yet. In episode 118, Dean Sumler came on, he's the VP of Talent Management and Learning at Schneider Electric, and he spoke about their talent marketplace and what they've done to implement it, but Very little of that conversation was about the technology. A lot of it was about the philosophy that they've had to apply and it about being a philosophical shift to opening up talent. And then some of the philosophers you spoke around was that, well, everybody's talent. It's not just about high potential. Everyone is talent in an environment, particularly where skills are in short supply. Transparency of opportunities right across the organisation is another key principle. Fluid talent supply, that you need to find ways to move people across organisational boundaries, either in full or in part. One of the things they do is offer these little part-time secondments, which they make available to people transparently through their talent platform, and just empowering employees and getting out of the way. you know, not having to have HR in the middle arranging all of these internal moves or internal condiments and so on. But there's a philosophical shift that needs to happen to make the most of your technology. It's not a case of just whacking the technology in. And I, you know, we did have one specific episode where we talked about technology with Fabrizio Conrado in episode 132 about building an integrated learning tech infrastructure. But, you know, a big thrust of his conversation was it's not about the tech, it's about the partnerships. So even where we talk squarely about tech, you know, to do tech well, there's a whole stack of other things you need to lead with, which I think comes out in the episodes as well.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, I love that one. It was great to hear from Fabrizio again, having worked with him for a few years in my last organization. But what I loved also about, he talked about exactly to your point about, again, this issue about dealing with complexity and understanding how businesses are evolving and how platforms can't fix you. You know, you need to be able to work with the right partners in order to maintain your flexibility. And the other thing that I loved about Fabrizio's one, which again was a theme I saw in some of the others, was how we're building our own skills, how we're building our own confidence, how we're stepping out of our own comfort zone. And now I know Fabrizio has always been a little bit techie, but AI is new to everyone. But Fabrizio, what I loved about his story with you was the fact that he wanted to explore more. And so by exploring, he started sharing. And by sharing, he then started exploring. his little podcast is now an AI generated little resource that he does. But it's not necessarily what he's done. But the fact that he has chosen, you know, again, using the words that we, you and I, love to lean in to this and to share and to share his story and to share his journey. So he's not having to go away and say, I've got to now go and spend even more time getting to know another platform. He built that learning journey for himself into his day to day work. And I thought that that was actually quite a significant thing. And I was looking out for that about, you know, with other people in in the podcast as well.

Michelle Ockers:

I didn't think it came through as strong with any other story.

Laura Overton:

Not, not with specifically, but my cosponsor, remember talking to him In 30 under 30 after learning technologies, that he was another great example of somebody going in, coming into an industry being interested. And he talked about all the different ways he said, look, I came from a gaming background. But you know, I was interested in this. So I started leaning into going online, joining communities, listening to podcasts, exploring new ways of doing his work. And Again, it's those sorts of stories that some of them are implied and some of them were specific. But it was a real joy for me to hear how people were literally getting out of their comfort zones in order to build their own skills. And one other example that I love, which is probably, it was Peter, I think, no, Adam. Adam McKinnon. Episode 119. Just the variety of backgrounds that man had. He was a psychologist. He was from the army. He was an epidemiologist.

Michelle Ockers:

He's got qualifications in finance as well.

Laura Overton:

Absolutely. And bringing all of those different lenses to his work at Reece. and combined with curiosity. And it's curiosity that was the real driving force between that interview. I know he was talking about data. I know he was talking about people analytics.

Michelle Ockers:

Everything was an exploration, right? Even him joining us and being given something like 6 to 12 months to run an exploratory activity. There was a hypothesis that they'd be able to use data to drive a culture of evidence-based decision making. But they didn't know for sure. The role didn't actually exist, but he had, you know, there's a senior leader in the people space who said, yeah, I think you've got an interesting background and the right set of skills to come in and see if we can figure this out. And it's just gone from strength to strength as he's explored and experimented with the organization and people have been open to it.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, absolutely. And it's one of the things I noticed in the research that I did was, you know, how we are building our own skills. It's something that Michelle, you and I over the years have been talking about our own skills and mindsets. It's kind of bubbled up in the 20 year research. It's bubbled up again today. And I was looking at the stories and it's the different backgrounds of your participants. and how they harness their backgrounds to apply it to the challenges that they're facing in the organisation. That is as powerful in my mind. as what they did, or the tools they did, or the processes they used, or the strategies they set, is how they applied themselves into their work, and how they leaned into their historical backgrounds, and combined it with their new context, with curiosity, and it was a, it really came through in a lot of spreads, in a lot of the podcasts that you did this year.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Yeah. Now I was going to ask about favorite episodes or guests, but when I came to think about that question, I'm like, I cannot answer that. Like there are so

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

many that were interesting this year and stand out for all different sorts of reasons. And I think to, to your point around, you know, what's, what maybe kind of, you've talked about lots of examples that were a little bit unusual or interesting, or there was sort of a key insight or takeaway from them. One we haven't mentioned is my only non L&D guest this year. Did you pick up on who that was?

Laura Overton:

Did I miss it? I think I missed it. Oh no. This is what I love about your podcast.

Michelle Ockers:

We can go back to them. Episode 131, a guy named James Kennedy who came on with Andrew Smith. Andrew was from Area 9 Lyceum and had partnered with the Australian Rail Track Corporation on a program to improve the safety of contractors working on rail infrastructure projects for ARTC. James is actually a civil engineer by background, and he's now working in safety and environment. And he trained as a change practitioner in order to take a people-centered approach to contractor safety. And he's a lovely individual. I got to actually meet him after the podcast recording at the AITD awards dinner. But just his general curiosity, we started with a conversation about Lego because I saw he had a whole stack of Lego on a shelf behind him. And, you know, it was like this childhood interest of his is how do things work and how do I put things together? And he said over time that evolved to how do people work? You know, what makes people tick? How does behavior work? So I think to your point about people bringing different backgrounds to things and that program has won awards in the rail industry in Australia for the approach to safety that they took and the quality of the behavioral change embedded in this program. So that's well worth a listen as well. You mentioned Dustin Lacasse before. I met him when I was in San Diego for the ATD conference and I joined a LinkedIn event where Dustin and I actually had this little, we went on this with a group of L&D leaders, this amazing event, best event I've ever been on. And it was a safari in the Safari Park Zoo, followed by dinner with a group of L&D leaders and a fireside chat. And one of my most memorable moments interviewing Dustin, he comes on and he's got this gorgeous giraffe backdrop on his zoom background. It was so lovely. But he's just he was interesting because of his not for profit background, which we talked about before. But it's really nice. You know, I have changed. I don't know if you've noticed. You may not have noticed. I've changed a few things in my style of interviewing. I'm playing around a little bit with my interviewing style this year. I want to say a big thank you to a fellow named Sagar Nair, who I didn't know existed at the start of the year. I think I've told you this story, Laura. He reached out to me and said, I'm between jobs. I'm based in India. I want to I'd love an opportunity to maybe intern with you, you know, for free. I just want to use it as a development opportunity. And is there something I could support you with? And when we spoke, I found that he just generally was really interested in listening to podcasts. And he has a really good ear for interviews and interviewing styles. And so he without it being set up this way, he kind of became my podcast hosting coach this year, an informal hosting coach. So I have been playing around with different kind of openings and more interesting questions. So wait for more of that next year, Laura.

Laura Overton:

I've always found your questions really insightful because these podcasts have always been about conversations, you know, and always about drawing on the real things that matter to your interviewees. And also sharing your own experience, Michelle. And I think that's so powerful as well. Probably quite a lot of whole podcasts that we could do on the different observations that you've made over the years. But I know this isn't what we're about here. But it's some it's some really powerful conversation. And that's what it's about how we can learn together when we just come into these environments together.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, I guess it's like a little window to the world of L&D, isn't it? That's what I try to create here, an opportunity to share stories and see what people take away from it. I just want to mention one final episode from my part, which was such a nice little end of year surprise. And it's a company called IOR, which stands for Inland Oil Refinery, episode 136. So the one before this one, I met Matt, Matt Garrett at the last conference I went to a couple of weeks ago, IOR is such an interesting little business. They're a small Australian family owned and operated business who work in the fuels industry. But one of the things they do is they operate these remote unmanned 24-hour diesel stops spread right across regional Australia. And we talked, Matt and one of his off-siders, Blake Soher, and I talked about the work they do to support their driver workforce. And it's really a great example of fit for purpose approaches, low tech, high connection. And if anyone wants, you know, I think I had more fun in that episode than I've had in a long time with any episode, partly at Blake's expense, because he kept talking about how he likes to make sure his high vis shirt is untucked when he goes out to the refineries and spends time with the drivers. So it looks like he hasn't just put it on the day before. He was very It's a really good sport and I can see why he has such a good rapport with the people that he supports. But such an interesting little business. So let's talk about 2024. If you could, if we could design it and sometimes, you know, I look at, I'm very opportunistic about what comes my way in terms of who crosses my path, what kind of work crosses my path that I lean into that. But if I were to be able to go out and find stories about anything or different types of stories, what do you think might be useful to people in 2024, Laura?

Laura Overton:

So I think what would be really useful is to, I've given a hint of it so far and we've already talked about it, how we are developing ourselves, how we're developing our teams. I think some stories around that can be really important because we are really good as a profession talking about what we do for other people. But it's as vital and it's as practical to say, what do we need to do for ourselves? And I know that your guests have got so many insights. So I'd love to see a little bit of that coming through as well. I think also next generation thinking. And what I'm referring to here is not the generation, you know, said I've been in research 20 years, I've been in the industry a lot longer. And so we, you know, people like myself, like yourself, Michelle, you know, we can say about what we think ought to be in the next generation of thinking. But, you know, do you remember your 50th episode, where we actually looked at, you know, sort of like the years experience, and we brought that guy who was brand new in the industry coming in. there are so many creative new ways of

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

thinking with the with the new generation of learning leaders that are coming through into our industry and I think bringing some of their voices into the debate would be so some younger guests you know people are working in startups people who are working because we learn from each other we learn from each other and we need to have, our thinking needs to cross over a little bit more and our inspiration comes when we hear of how somebody else is tackling their challenge in their environment and some of the new generation of learning leaders. are tackling their challenges in super creative ways. They're much more open about talking about their experiments, about their failures, what they're learning, how they're moving on.

Michelle Ockers:

So as I cast my eye over the list of guests this year, you're right. I mean, I did have some smaller organizations, IOR, San Diego Zoo, But a lot of my guests were from larger organizations this year. So that's an interesting pick up.

Laura Overton:

So many good lessons and so many good lessons from the larger organizations into the smaller ones. That's my point. Everything we've been talking about today is as relevant to a startup, to a charity, to a public sector, a large organization, small organization. So we've lessons to be learning from each other. And your whole sessions this year have been really powerful in sharing those lessons for everybody.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, thank you for that. And I think I'll take that on board with maybe looking at some smaller organizations in the coming year and some more not-for-profits as well, I think, Laura.

Laura Overton:

Yeah, absolutely. New thinkers coming in.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes. Yes. OK, so I think we need to move into a bit of a bit of a wrap up. What's maybe just one thing each we're looking forward to professionally next year in 2024?

Laura Overton:

For me, professionally, it's going to be about being intentional, be intentional about my own curiosity, my own self-development. I'm often asked to do things that you've done in the past. Whereas next year, it's going to be about moving forward intentionally with curiosity about what's needed for the future. And so I'm looking to see that in the industry. I am certainly looking at how people are developing their own skills their own confidence and becoming more self-aware about how critical and vital we are in today's workplace. So there's just a few of the themes that I'm picking up on professionally. What about you?

Michelle Ockers:

I think continuing to lean into connection and community. I'm looking forward to seeing the impact of some of the longer-term bodies of work we've been doing this year at Learning Uncut. We've got a couple of learning strategies to be launched early in the new year. And we've done a lot of work with an organization in Australia

Learning Uncut Episode 137 Learning Uncut 2023 Review– Laura Overton

where we've helped them to basically revamp L&D, including that end-to-end piece of work around their workflow processes, tools, upskilling their team, helping them to build their team. So I think that's a really interesting body of work and following that through. always open to working with new people. And I've also got, for the strategy work that we're doing, we'll be launching, this is probably a sneak peek, launching a new group-based program. So, rather than working just with one organization on learning strategy, taking on a cohort of around about eight people at a time and guiding through creating learning strategy for their organization, because some organizations are a bit smaller and they can't afford to work with us one on one. And I've been looking for a way to scale that and make that more available to many of the L&D professionals who say, I'd like to I'd like to do more and get some more support. So that will be exciting, I think, for us as well.

Laura Overton:

That will be so powerful from what we've learned from our Emerging Stronger work, when we work together and support each other, cohort-based learning. We're taking our own medicine here, Michelle. And supporting people to apply over a period of time.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So for listeners, the podcast is going to take a little break over the Australian summer period. We'll have one more Elevate episode out on the 19th of December. And then a couple of weeks off, we've got a special, a new style of episode. I like an experiment, Laura, called the Learning Uncut Playbook. So we've got a playbook coming up on starting in an L&D leader role in a new organization. So where you're switching organizations, how do you set yourself up for success in that? And then back into regular episodes from the 23rd of January. So, Laura, thank you, as always, for your support. Big thank you to all of our guests this year as well. All of the guests are just amazing with their willingness to share and talk about what's worked and maybe what they've learned along the way. And to our listeners, thank you so much for your support. If you're finding Learning Uncut valuable in 2023, Please share it with others. Tell a colleague about it. Post about it on LinkedIn. Of course, rate it and leave a review on your favorite podcast app. Anything to help ensure that as many L&D professionals as possible have an opportunity to learn from the work of our guests. Thanks again, Laura. It's always lovely to have an interesting chat with you.

Laura Overton:

And on behalf of the listeners, thank you to you and to the team for bringing us this podcast and so many insights over the years. We really appreciate you.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you, Laura.



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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About your host, Michelle Ockers



Michelle is the co-founder and Chief Learning Strategy at Learning Uncut. She is an experienced, 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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