Michelle Ockers:
Hello and welcome to the second Learning Uncut episode for 2021. I'm not sure if the experience of the start of a new year is the same in the northern hemisphere as it is here Down Under where it's summer and we have our longer school holiday break. I find it a time of tremendous renewal and fresh energy. It's the perfect time to take stock of our growth and professional development practices. With that in mind this is the second (and final) episode in the Learning Uncut new year Professional Development series where I speak with guests about approaches that I've found powerful for my own development in recent years.

In Episode 69 I spoke with Jane Hart about modern workplace learning, Nicole Lam about Working Out Loud and Harold Jarche about Personal Knowledge Mastery (or PKM for short). My first guest today, Mike Taylor, is a great follow up to Harold Jarche. Mike uses a very slick PKM practice to find, curate and share high quality resources about learning, technology and design in a weekly newsletter. He discusses why and how he started his newsletter, how he has developed his practices over the past 15 years and uses technology to make his process more efficient.

I've been inspired to do two things as a result of speaking with Harold and Mike. The first is to enrol in Harold's PKM course again to refresh my own practices. It started on 18 January, so there may still be time for you to join the program alongside me – or find the next available program via Harold's website in the show notes. The second thing I'm doing is to resume producing my What I Learned this Month videos. I was publishing these from mid 2018 to late 2019, but they fell by the wayside. Now I feel like I missed tracking and sharing a lot of my own learning in what has been a high growth period, and I'm ready to start again. These will be on my blog and LinkedIn feed if you are curious about them.

The final approach I share is the use of mental models. I'm joined by Arun Pradhan and Shai Desai who recently launched the website Model Thinkers. Mental models are simplified representations of how our complex world works. They help you to understand that world and to take action in it. I first started collecting and consciously using mental models after Arun showed me how he was doing this using Evernote in early 2018. He has been talking about their role in developing learning agility for a number of years and identified that people were interested but needed help in creating what he calls their own 'latticework of mental models.'

I recorded this conversation with Arun and Shai a week before Model Thinkers launched. It's now been live for almost two months and I've found it really useful to be able to access some of the world's best ideas in one place, condensed and summarised in a way that helps me to use them. Many of the case studies shared by Learning Uncut guests draw on ideas and practices from domains outside of L&D such as marketing, design thinking or behavioural economics. Mental models help us tap into cross-domain knowledge, improve our decision-making, problem solving and planning. Arun and Shai have set up a discount code especially for Learning Uncut listeners to use if they join Model Thinkers before the end of February 2021. The code is one word, all in capitals – it's LEARNINGUNCUT. Go take a look at the website to get a feel for what Model Thinkers offers and how it could be of value for you.

Learning Uncut Episode 70
Mike Taylor, Arun Pradhan, Shai Desai – Modern Professional Development Approaches

I'd love to hear what you are finding useful for your professional development and what your goals or plans are for your development in 2021. Please share on Twitter or LinkedIn using the hashtag #LearningUncut. Finally, if you are interested in Professional Development mentoring you can reach out to me via LinkedIn or my website.

Michelle Ockers:

I'd like to welcome Mike Taylor to Learning Uncut. It's great to have you here, Mike.

Mike Taylor:

It's great to be here. Thanks for inviting me, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, I felt it would be incomplete not to have you here for a couple of reasons when we're talking about professional development for learning professionals. And one of those is I've become a big fan of your weekly newsletter, and I think it's full of great resources for learning and development professionals. And the other thing is having had a recent conversation with you, looking at how much is in that newsletter and the fact you put it out consistently week after week and being fascinated by, "Well, how does Mike do that?" I thought it would be great to share some of your process around how you stay abreast of what's happening and figure out what to share and what's going to be of value. So if we can talk about both of those things, that would be fabulous.

Mike Taylor:

Absolutely. I'd love to talk about that to anybody who will listen, so this should be fun.

Michelle Ockers:

Excellent. So, tell us a little about the news... Oh, well, actually, let's start with you. Tell us a little about yourself, introduce yourself.

Mike Taylor:

Yeah. So I am a learning consultant. I work for a consulting company here in Columbus, Ohio in the United States called Change 4 Growth. So that basically means anything that remotely looks like training or learning or anything anywhere close to that neighbourhood, I will sort of touch at some point. I do some facilitation for some of the ATD certification programs. And then I, also, this year started teaching in the graduate program at Franklin University in their instructional design and performance technology program. So, that stuff keeps me pretty busy along with chasing a couple of kids and all the things around home.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So it's a portfolio career profile at the moment.

Mike Taylor:

Yeah. Yeah. And it's very fortunate to have all of those things.

Michelle Ockers:

Lovely. So your newsletter, Mike, when did you start and why did you start?

Mike Taylor:

Great question. I think I probably started... I know I started my website, which is the hub for everything that goes into the newsletter and the evolution of what became the newsletter. So that was, I think, 2007. About the same time, I think, I probably signed up for a Twitter account and I'm not sure I really knew what to do with either one of them at first. I look back at my first couple of posts and it was a couple of sentences and it was clear that I didn't really know for sure what I was doing. So the newsletter came after that.

The very first time I ever did a newsletter was when I moved into a new group at work. So I transferred to another part of the company. I was working for pretty big power company, so power plants and generating electricity and all that sort of stuff. And I moved into a new group, and I was getting a lot of the same questions, a lot around technology and office and that type of stuff. And I remember having the thought, "Well, if this person has this question, there's probably several others who have the same or similar question."

And so I said, "Well, what I'll do is I'll start to put these together. And I would send out one little, two or three-minute little short tip of a question that I got that week. And I would share it with the 10 people in my group." I remember the first one I did, a colleague of mine says, "Well, aren't you going to run out of things to talk about?" And I said, "I don't know, maybe so. We'll find out." And so whatever that's been ago, 15 years ago, I still haven't run out of things to share. So I think we've safely answered that question-

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, really.

Mike Taylor:

... but it was one of those kinds of things... Yeah. And it was one of those kinds of things where, "Hey, can you forward it to my friend? Can you forward it to my wife?" And this was just a little tiny internal email newsletter that grew to be over a thousand subscribers.

Michelle Ockers:

So when did you take it public and why did you take it public?

Mike Taylor:

I think when I left that company, I didn't have... Because that was all on an internal system. I had grown into the habit of finding things and sharing things with the thought that, "Well, if it's helpful for me, there's probably a lot of other people out here are doing similar work. It's probably helpful for a lot of others." It had two purposes. One was to help myself on finding this stuff and researching and connecting with all these resources. And then it's so easy to just share the things that you find useful and the best things you find. It's so easy. It takes minutes. Once you do the work and put things in place, it's literally a click of a button to share things with others.

And so the way I see it is almost a crime not to share those good things and keep it to yourself. So I think I had built the habit by then. And that's when I really started saying, "Okay, how can I use my website to do this?" And then threw a little bit of experimentation with connecting email tools, like Mailchimp with my website to automate some of that stuff because that's another thing is anybody who's doing this also has other jobs and this is not paying any of my bills. And so I still want to do it, but I want to be efficient about how I do it.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. So in terms of actually what do you get out of sharing in this way, because it's not making you money and you say it's not taking you a lot of time because you've figured out the process, which I'll get you to walk us through in a little bit, what's the real benefit to you?

Mike Taylor:

Well, I think I've been somebody who even when I was a kid, I've always been energized by the process of learning. So I was never the kid in school that said, "I can't wait to get out." I was never in much of a hurry because I liked learning. So it's part of the learning process to me. I seek this stuff out. And I think one of the early days, one of the things that really set a lot of this in action was when Google Reader came around. And so now, it gave me the power instead of having to go and check and look at a bunch of different sites, I had a method where I can elect and opt into things and have those things come to me. The degree of increase in efficiency in just that simple process was really a game changer.

Michelle Ockers:

So what sort of content, what sort of topics, what do you gather and share resources about, Mike?

Mike Taylor:

So a pretty wide variety of things, but I think most of the stuff that I... I sort of have everything segmented. So the most of the stuff I find myself looking for and spending time really taking deeper dives into are around this intersection of learning, design and technology, and how those three things come together. So that intersection is where I find myself and sort of the fringes of that spending a lot of my attention.

Michelle Ockers:

In terms of what goes into each newsletter, is it predominantly around what you're finding useful or do you think about, "Well, I've got an audience now. What are they going to find useful?" Where's the balance between the two?

Mike Taylor:

Yeah, I get not a lot, but fairly regularly, I get questions, "What about this?" or "Here's a thought," or "Here's something," or "Have you seen anything about X or Y?" And that sometimes could point me in a direction or maybe a direction I hadn't thought of before. So I have those influences, but probably 90-some percentage of that is these are the things that I find valuable and this is the world that I'm swimming in. And so it's just a natural thing that that's what ends up being in the newsletter.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So talk us through the process. You said earlier that it doesn't take a lot of extra effort, but there's always so much in it, so it looks like you've gone to a lot of effort. So just talk us through the process you use to be able to put out this newsletter every week, which is just jam packed with great quality resources.

Mike Taylor:

Yeah. So I mentioned Google Reader, and that's when the evolution of this whole process started, so just being able to subscribe to things and have some control over that. So, Google Reader went away. And then now, for me, personally, Feedly has stepped in to fill that role. So, I subscribed. It's been a while since I've looked, but it's definitely over probably

500 sources. I think at one point it was 700, but I don't read all of those every day. It's not that type of a, I don't know, I would say burden maybe, but what I can do with tools like Feedly or Google Reader or whatever is I can take control over what do I want to consume when. So I've basically got a small set of A-list topics that I'll try to read every day, a slightly larger set in my sort of B-list if I have time, and then everything else might be on the weekend, or at some point I just may mark all of those as read and not worry about it. So I've really put A-list, B-list and everything else.

And so the other thing I do is typically every morning, I'm up early. So when I'm having coffee and breakfast or whatever, I'll get 30 or 60 minutes to read. So, I'll check my A-list first. If I have time, I'll work my way through that. I've evolved this to I see something valuable every day, right? And then the other thing, by being able to connect with people and you subscribe to people that are sort of have similar interests, I don't ever worry about missing something, because if something's important, there are multiple people who will see it and I will find it from somebody. So if I miss it in one place, probably the odds are I'll catch it in another.

Michelle Ockers:

So apart from Feedly, where else might you discover resources that are of value to you?

Mike Taylor:

Well, I mentioned people. People are really big one, and I think Twitter is great for that. There's a degree of serendipity, I think, involved in Twitter. I think Twitter has gotten a bad rep and there is some bad stuff there, but you opt into the things that you get. And so you don't have to see the bad stuff if you don't want to. So I use a lot of lists. I've got probably three or four lists. So that's typically the way I take Twitter in. It's not through the massive fire hose of-

Michelle Ockers:

So lists, for those who are unfamiliar with Twitter, is Twitter functionality that you can use to filter what you're seeing based around certain people or a topic, and you control whose accounts are on that list, right?

Mike Taylor:

Right. Exactly. And it works similar. For me, it's similar. It's sort of topical around what are those things? The people that I want to see who are talking about the things I want to hear about.

Michelle Ockers:

So you're getting feeds of content resources into Feedly. You're also looking on Twitter and things are coming up by Twitter. You're rating things. So if things aren't automatically transferring through your newsletter, I assume there's a level of you rating them and deciding what you want to go into your newsletter. Is that how the selection process works?

Mike Taylor:

So two things the way that works. One is I will pipe things into Feedly. So for example, if I like a tweet, that goes into a folder on Tweetly. Sorry, it goes into a folder on Feedly. If I mark something on YouTube to watch later, that will go in there. There's a way to get RSS feeds for all of those. If you're using any of the read-it-later apps, you can set that up to come in there. So I'm just really trying to point things to a one central location.

Michelle Ockers:
Right. So Feedly becomes your primary curation tool then?

Mike Taylor:

Yeah, it's my sort of hub for consuming, like 99% of the stuff that I consume, even though it's coming from a lot of different places. And so once it gets in there, that's the primary processing is happening in there. And Feedly, they have a feature called Boards, which is basically the equivalent of bookmarks, but I can put those bookmarks and I can segment those so I can have different boards for different topics. So some of those, I just save for myself for future reference, but I've got a newsletter board.

And so if I see something, as I read through there, I'll tag it to that board. And then Thursday or whenever I start to write that week's newsletter, I'll go to that board and I've got a pre-curated list, then I'll go through there. I pick out typically three podcasts for one section, typically five articles. And so I've got those setting there queued up for me, and then I just pick from that relatively short list. And I just pick out which ones are the best or happen to be speaking to me that particular week.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. So then you manually create the newsletter?

Mike Taylor:

Yep. So I will write it in Google Docs because that's the easiest way that I have found for my workflow to work. So I'll drop the link in there, pull out a sentence or two, throw in a picture. And then from Google Docs, I can do layouts and formatting and that sort of stuff. And then there's just a nice little plugin that says, "Okay. Take this document in Google and push it to WordPress."

Michelle Ockers:

Right.

Mike Taylor:

Once it goes over there, it's pretty minimal from that point. I'd give it a category and maybe a little quote or whatever goes out on social media, and then schedule it.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So there's a level of automation and smart automation in there with your high-quality human filtering, figuring out what's of value and putting it together.

Mike Taylor:

Right. Right. So it's trying to combine some of the... Well, there's not really much scraping of artificial stuff going on, but at least every source that goes into that process, I've opted in at some level. So I've not just put in keywords and see what comes back. So I've, to some degree, maybe varying degrees, vetted those sources to come in into the first place.

Michelle Ockers:

So one of the other guests on our two professional development specials in Learning Uncut this January was Harold Jarche, and we talk about his Seek-Sense-Share framework for personal knowledge mastery. What you've just described is a really nice example of how you

have personalized your own knowledge mastery, and then found a way to share what you're finding valuable. So, it goes nicely with Harold's PKM framework.

Mike Taylor:

Harold is somebody who's influenced me quite a bit. When I talk about this, I point a lot of people to his Seek-Sense-Share model, because I think it's really great. It makes a lot of sense. So yeah, I've been following Harold for as long as I can remember.

Michelle Ockers:

Yep. Yep. So often, people who are wanting to put in place a good personal practices to stay abreast of change, find resources and so on will have some common challenges. And one of those is just being in the habit of, for instance, reading regularly. Maybe it's, "How do I find good quality sources?" In which case, I would point them to your newsletter or encourage them to explore using something like Feedly to start curating for themselves. What's been the biggest challenge to you along the way to actually maintaining a personal practice around staying abreast of change and curating in this way, and then sharing?

Mike Taylor:

I don't know that I've had too much trouble. I mean, I've personally gotten so much value out of it that I almost would be afraid to stop at this point because I just learned so much. I have times every once in a while, people don't reply a lot to the newsletter. If I go a few weeks and it's sort of crickets, you never really know like, "Do people find this valuable? Should I keep doing this?" That doesn't happen too often, but every once in a while, I just think, "Is this the way I should spend my time?" So far, the answer has always been yes. That's the only thing. I think anybody who puts anything out creatively probably has some sense of that at some point or another. So, hopefully that's a normal thing.

Michelle Ockers:

I think it is. I find with the podcast as well, I can see how many downloads the podcast is getting and subscribers and so on, so that's nice. But in many instances, there's not a lot of conversation around the podcast. Every now and then I get an email and some episodes attract more interaction on LinkedIn, but then if I go to a conference or sometimes people approach me for a conversation, email me, or approach me in line for conversation, and it's clear that the reason they're interested is because of the podcast and they'd been listening to the podcast. So I think for anyone who's thinking about the value of showing your work or sharing resources, working out loud, whatever label we want to give this, the answer is there is always someone out there to whom the things you're interested in are relevant. And if you maintain some habits, they'll find it if they're curious.

Mike Taylor:

Yeah, they absolutely will. Those times when people just take a note and say, "Hey, I just wanted to let you know, thanks that was helpful," or "This particular thing was helpful." And I assume you are the same way. When you get those, it just brightens your day and gives you some renewed energy to keep doing it.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. So if any of our listeners are wanting to improve their own personal knowledge management practices, perhaps start a regular reading practice or some other regular practice to stay abreast of change, what words of encouragement or advice would you give them?

Learning Uncut Episode 70
Mike Taylor, Arun Pradhan, Shai Desai – Modern Professional Development Approaches

Mike Taylor:

Just do it, just get started. Don't try to have the perfect setup right off the bat. Don't spend time researching a million tools and trying to perfect it out of the gate because you won't. I just don't think it's possible. So, start with one small goal of you want to read more industry news or whatever that is, and then try something, like Feedly or one of the read-it-later apps or any of that stuff. And then just put it on your calendar, right? So for me, it's early in the morning before anybody in the house is up. It could be two or three times a week, even for 10 or 15 minutes. You'd be amazed at what you can accumulate if you do 10 or 15 minutes three times a week for six months. It seems like a small thing, but those small actions over time, they really make a huge, huge difference.

Michelle Ockers:

So, start small. Don't get overwhelmed and say, "Well, Mike's a machine. He does an hour of reading a day. How on earth he does it? I can't do that." Just start small with whatever little practice works for you, and then see what value you get from there and what works for you, right?

Mike Taylor:

Yeah, absolutely. And it doesn't have to be... I don't have to follow hundreds and hundreds of sources, like I do. I didn't do that when I started. I've gotten pretty efficient and I have the capacity to do that. But if you're just starting out, if you find even 10 or 15 good sources, like you and Harold and John Stepper and a lot of the folks you've had on your podcast, just look them up there, they're probably sharing lots of great information. And if you find 10 or 15, 20 would be great, but you don't have to have a ton of people, and that's a pretty rich start to whatever you're trying to do.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So the first step for people is to go and join your newsletter if they were not already subscribed. We'll put a link in the show notes, Mike. So I have one final question I'm asking everyone in this professional development series. What's one thing you've gotten better at in 2020, and how did you get better at it?

Mike Taylor:

I think just given the state of the world and the United States in particular, I've gotten a lot better at appreciating small things. So the things that I probably wouldn't have given a lot of second glances before, a lot of those small things are becoming big things to me. When all of this craziness started, we got lots of family walks and game nights and that sort of stuff. My oldest is in high school now, so I know the clock is ticking. So those small things are the big things.

www.michelleockers.com

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, that's really nice. One thing I've started doing along the same vein, my parents live in Sydney, I'm in Brisbane in Australia, and they're about, I think, almost a thousand kilometres apart. And I haven't been able to go and visit them since March. We started doing a nightly FaceTime. My mum likes to do a quiz from the newspaper after dinner. So we FaceTime and do the quiz together.

Mike Taylor:

I love it.

Michelle Ockers:

It's just lovely. And I've never had daily contact with my parents since I left home, so it was beautiful.

Mike Taylor:

I love it. I love it. I might try to steal that idea.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So thank you, Mike, for joining me in this special episode. I hope people were inspired to take some sort of little step to help them stay abreast of change in this ever-changing world.

Mike Taylor:

And I hope they do, too. If there's any way I can help, I'm easy to find. People, please feel free to send me questions.

Michelle Ockers:

We'll put links to your LinkedIn and Twitter profiles in the show notes as well.

Mike Taylor:

Excellent.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. Thanks so much, Mike.

Mike Taylor:

Thank you.

Michelle Ockers:

Before we move on to our second conversation I'd like to let you know about the Emerging Stronger Masterclasses and community. If you are an L&D professional who is in a place to make or influence change in your organisation I invite you to consider this for your professional development. Kicking off in March 2021, I'm hosting Emerging Stronger alongside my Emergent podcast Series co-hosts, Laura Overton and Shannon Tipton. We'll be joined by experts from the podcast series to guide you through a hands-on experience with peers from other organisations to identify breakthrough actions to address the biggest challenges that you are working on in your organisation, and build your credibility and reputation as an L&D Leader. Go to emergentmasterclass.com for information.

Michelle Ockers:

So I'm talking to two people who've been on the podcast before and who I've reached out for their work around mental models as an approach to professional development. Arun, would you like to introduce yourself again?

Arun Pradhan:

Yes. I'm a learning and performance strategist and designer, and I've previously launched Learn2Learn.

Michelle Ockers:

And this time around, we're talking about something new you've launched ModelThinkers.

Arun Pradhan:

That's right. Yep.

Michelle Ockers:

And your collaborator in this venture is Shai Desai. Welcome, Shai, would you like to introduce yourself?

Shai Desai:

Yeah. Hi, I'm Shai Desai, I'm the co-founder of ModelThinkers, obviously, and a co-founder of Learning Plan, which is my day job. So, more learning and development consulting work as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. Thank you. And, Arun, you, I think, were one of the people who introduced me to the idea of mental models, but of course, most of us live with mental models every day, but perhaps just don't recognize that we are and that we're using them and how they're influencing the way we think and work. And I recall sitting with you at a cafe in Melbourne, probably early 2018-

Arun Pradhan:

Back when we could …

Michelle Ockers:

... and you pulled out Evernote, right?

Arun Pradhan:

Yes.

Michelle Ockers:

You started showing me your mental model library in Evernote. And I currently still have my little mental model library in Evernote, which I go out sporadically and add things to, and then it falls away, and then I think, "Oh, I must add something into the mental model library." And I've found it super useful so I wanted to share it as a professional development tool with the listeners. It was, of course, also one of the things you included in Learn2Learn the app, and we will link to that in the show notes as well. How did you get started with mental models? Give us the backstory.

Arun Pradhan:

Look, I actually can't remember the actual moment where it all came together. Basically, I've been reading and accessing a lot of information and a lot of knowledge from all sorts of sources like reading books and watching Ted Talks and so on. My memory is shocking at the best of times, but even people who have good memory, as you know, it's hard just to keep all those takeaways in an actionable framework that you can use. I'd find this amazing gem and then a week later I would forget it. So, I came across this idea of this lattice work of mental models that, basically, it's a way of thinking that you're combining these mental models and you're developing the links and connections between them, which was originally from Charles Munger. And it's been popularized a lot by people like James Clear and Shane Parrish and others. So it was kind of like a turning point for me in terms of being able to develop more effective and consistent critical thinking and decision-making skills.

Michelle Ockers:

So how have you used mental models then?

Arun Pradhan:

I use it daily. I use it, everything from conversations with my kids. One of my kids was just talking ... I was talking with him about how he's playing too many video games at the moment and how he needs to recalibrate. And he actually raised the idea of activation energy, which is one of the mental models that we talk about in our family. And yeah, the video game has a lower activation energy than actually reading a book, for example. And I was just saying, it's getting past that first three chapters and then you get into the book. And then even when you're watching movies, you're talking about the hero's journey. So we're constantly using it, but I'm also, obviously, using it at work and making those connections between some of the things I've learned at home and applying them in the work context as well.

Michelle Ockers:

So, what is a mental model? I'm curious. We're throwing the term around, but what does it actually mean?

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah. So the world is just crazy complex. There's a lot to it. So if you think right now about a good friend of yours, and you think about that person, you'll probably think about their name, you might have an image of their face, and you might have some qualities about, you might have a sense that they're generous, you might have a sense that they're ready to support you, or they're a bit unreliable or run late a lot of the time, that's a mental model. You have a simplified version or a simplified representation of who that person is.

Because if you actually thought about who that person is, you couldn't hold it in your head because they can't even, because it's just so complicated. People and the world is just crazy, just complicated. So we have this simplified shortcuts. And the way we've defined mental models, it's those simplified shortcuts that can be re-used across different industries. So we've tried to pick the best concepts, the best ideas from different disciplines, but it's also frameworks, tools, it's anything that you can use to have more of those conscious mental shortcuts that can actually help you to understand yourself and the world and take action in it.

Michelle Ockers:

So, Shai, when did you first come across mental models and how have you been using them?

Shai Desai:

I've been using it for some time, I guess, in everyday work. As a learning consultant, we are problem solving and relying on intuition to work through situations. So I've been using them on and off. I guess we haven't really thought about a framework this way. So the framework part probably came a bit later on when we started building processes around how we approach client work and the steps that we take to get to a solution. And then, I guess, from there we sort of just started thinking of the parameters of how we could bring together those ideas and keep using them and repurposing them. So, that's how we started using it.

Michelle Ockers:

So, you use them in a group setting with your colleagues at Learning Plan, as well as an individual then.

Shai Desai:

Yeah, it's used both, individually to make decisions around things that I'm working on, but mostly in a group setting around projects and how we're going to drive to an outcome and things that we know and don't know about some environments. And then we try to bring some outside thinking in from other people. So that's where we sort of depend on what they also know and their mental models and their frameworks.

Michelle Ockers:

And do you track them explicitly or is this more just stuff people have in their head? And when do you decide when to get a mental model out of your head and put it down somewhere or when to pull it out of the collective body of knowledge, whatever that looks like and actually put it somewhere? How does that work for you?

Shai Desai:

We're pretty dependent on thinking out loud and putting things down. So we do have processes we follow that say that we have to go through a certain stage or levels of thinking around how we're approaching problem solving. So there is a lot of documentation around how we do things. The different people or the more people that we involve in the project, obviously, there's difference in the way that we think, so we just try and depend on what is the need for this project? And do we need to think fast or slow, or do we need to think about certain ways or certain biases that people bring in? And that's how we approach things.

Michelle Ockers:

Bias is really interesting, right? And challenging our bias. And if we can use mental models to do that, that's got to be effective.

Shai Desai:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So, I'm not sure, I think it may have been Arun's idea, but if it was your idea in the first place, Shai, you jump in on this one. Where did the idea to create ModelThinkers come from and what is ModelThinkers?

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah. You kind of experienced it in a way, Michelle, because I was out there peddling the idea of using mental models and building a lattice work of mental models as part of my work

around Learn2Learn. I was tending to get keynotes and workshops around learning agility. So I'd go through a few different approaches. And probably one of the four key ways I'd talk about developing learning agility was to develop, consciously, a lattice work of mental models. And then I'd talk about the Evernote system I had and I'd talk about how I would suck these mental models in and summarize them in my own notes, use a spaced recall app to try to memorize them and so on.

And people went in the surveys that I do, the polling. The techniques I talked about, that polled the highest, that got the most excitement, but there was such a gap. When I went back and talked to these organizations and people barely anyone was able to do it because it was just too hard. So, that was clear. With my entrepreneurial hat on, I saw that gap of people wanting to do this and yet it just being too hard. So ModelThinkers were just really, in conjunction with conversations with Shai, we talked about how we could bridge that gap between our perceived market need and people just not taking it up because there's just too much friction there.

Michelle Ockers:

So, Shai, what is ModelThinkers then?

Shai Desai:

It's quite honestly a summary of some of the world's best ideas condensed in a way that you can obviously apply them. So they are frameworks and descriptions and models collected by different categories and it's used by teams or individuals, or equally decision makers, problem solvers just to help them think through a problem and apply that learning and get a better result from it. So it's helping you just to think better, to clarify the ways that you're thinking about a problem and, hopefully, get to a better outcome.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. We're actually recording this in mid-November. I think, is it one week before ModelThinkers actually launches? Is that right?

Arun Pradhan:

It is. Yes, one week.

Michelle Ockers:

It is. So, we'll have the benefit of hindsight by the time this is published in January. We'll know how the launch has gone and what the uptake has been like, but can one of you describe the user experience? Give me a use case, why would I use it and what would the experience be like?

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah. I think there's probably two entry points. There's firstly, for people who've come across the ideas before and who just want to suck out the best ideas from different disciplines. We've already seen, for example, in L&D people trying to take ideas from marketing. I did that in terms of design thinking and now behavioural economics. So you might go there and think, "Okay, I need to reshape my L&D practice more as a product designer." So you might jump in and go look at some key product design mental models to then incorporate into your world. So that's one, I guess, more mature, sophisticated approach that you're already going in there shopping for mental models. But having said that, someone else might come in and find that approach too overwhelming. Because there's over 100 mental models there, they might just find that a bit overwhelming. So the other entry point for someone who's just trying to get their heads around this approach is the blog section.

And the blog, I almost call them mini recipes, it's like saying, "Okay, if you're trying to be more productive, think about using these four mental models in combination. Or if you're trying to think about agility in your organization and team, think about these four mental models and here are some other ones that you might want to consider." So it's starting to give you snapshots of how you can tie them together in a mini lattice work. And they're not definitive, but they're just trying to ... Because I think one of the big challenges here is people will just see these mental models as a shopping list. And the real power is actually their combination. So that's why we've got these two entry points. You can come in through the mental models and just say, "Okay, I just want to steal the best things from marketing right now and incorporate that into my life or data." Or you can go and see these little snapshots of how these lattice works can play together and how you might want to combine them in ways that you haven't thought of.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, that sounds super useful. It feels from the things I've read about ModelThinkers, there's almost like a bit of a community element that I can maybe create my own recipes and share them as well. Is that how it works?

Arun Pradhan:

Yeah. In the first instance you can create your own mental models, but at the moment it's just for your personal viewing. We've got this massive backlog of things that we want to do and things that we came up with and, obviously, this is a minimum viable product so we've just come out with. It's a nice, shiny MVP, we're really trying to give it the full experience, but in terms of some of these other elements and, particularly, our focuses after launch will be how we build the community, how we provide people connection with each other, as well as with the ideas. So, at the moment, the key thing is, you can create your own models and add that to your own personal lattice work. And then, we'll be interviewing leading change managers or entrepreneurs and giving snapshots of what mental models they use and how they combine them.

Michelle Ockers:

I like that idea. Yeah. So, Shai, then, is it less about memory? I don't know, Arun says he's got a terrible memory, but I've seen him in action and he can pull stuff together in all sorts of ways on the spot. I'm very envious. Your kind of this modern Renaissance man in my eyes, Arun, the way you can weave together things. And I don't know if it's mental models that's really accelerated that, but it's very impressive the way you think and communicate using cross-discipline concepts and approaches. So, Shai, is this a way of helping us have to rely less on our memory? Is it more kind of it becomes, in some ways, a bit of a performance support tool as well?

Shai Desai:

Yeah, I think so. I think it adds to memory in a way. I guess the better information we're putting in, the better our intuition will be and, therefore, we're making better decisions. And, to me, I think Arun's great superpower is that he's trained his memory to think of these cross-disciplinary models and come out and go, "Yeah, when I'm in this situation, this is the best way for me to make that decision." And you saw him apply that with his kids. I guess, I don't apply that with my kids always.

So we do break down bigger problems into smaller things, we do think about things like, "What is our North Star? What are we trying to be?" We think about those things quite often. And we do go through the process of inversion and try and sort of reverse our thinking on the good day, "What does a good day look like? How do I avoid being a bad day?" So we do

think through those things quite a bit. So I guess coming back to your point, I think, yeah, the better information we are putting in through these mental models, the increase in intuition of better decisions we will be making in the future.

Michelle Ockers:

You've mentioned a couple of different mental models that you both just sort of talked about, different mental models that you use, is there any particular model you're finding particularly valuable or interesting at the moment, Shai?

Shai Desai:

I use first principles a lot. So that's probably one that I come back to. I guess we use inversion a fair bit and we did explain inversion already on our blog post, which I'm sort of excited about. They're probably my main first couple, but I guess we also rely on just thinking fast and slow. So when we're going through certain situations and working at our problem solving it's, "Where do we want to spend our time?" And when we have the opportunity to spend time to think solidly on things, that's where I come back and lean all the best models.

Michelle Ockers:

How about you, Arun, do you have any favourites?

Arun Pradhan:

There's lots. Pareto Principle is the one I just use all the time, but while researching for ModelThinkers, a few of the ones I've got a bit surprised by which I think I need to think more about, regression to the mean I really like. And it's this idea of seeing extreme results. And normally when you see an extremely good result in whatever, like sports or your work or whatever, you attribute that to some sort of causal relationships. So you think, "Oh, it's because I talk this way or I led with that, or I wore this hat." And really, if it's more about luck than skill, that regression to the mean will show that it'll balance out, but some of the examples ...

And I kind of knew that mental model previously, but when I dug into it and found out some of the examples, which you can look on the site, it's around Sports Illustrated, this curse which people thought there was around being on the cover of Sports Illustrated or training pilot cadets, which then was understood by that mental model. I think that's really interesting. It's quite good for L&D actually, because trying to understand the causal versus correlation affects. So regression to the mean is one that I knew about, but hadn't really thought that was that relevant to what I was doing until recently.

Michelle Ockers:

It strikes me, one of the things that comes up over and over in the Learning Uncut, the regular Learning Uncut episodes, the case studies or stories are examples of this cross-domain practices and people reaching beyond the boundaries of learning and development, be it human-centered design, or marketing, or behavioural economics. And what mental models do is give us a way to get to the heart of practices from those other domains and look at how we apply them. So I think super useful stuff and has certainly helped me to make some shortcuts. So just getting it even easier. I can get it out of Evernote now and tap into the hard work you guys have done. So, is there anything else you'd like to share with listeners either about ModelThinkers or about mental models generally?

Arun Pradhan:

I think the one thing I'd say is, if it's new to you and you come onto ModelThinkers just don't get overwhelmed. Just start slowly, just choose one or two mental models. One of the ones that you'd probably want to start with is compounding and that idea of marginal growth. People think it's like you kind of overestimate what you can achieve in a year and underestimate what you can achieve in 10 years. So, it's the idea of just choose a couple of mental models a week and start exploring them. We feature a model of the week. So even if you just focus on engaging around the model of the week and trying to incorporate that into your life, and you can do that for free, you don't even have to sign up for that, you can actually just sign up to our newsletter for free and be part of that and that will help you grow your thinking ability and your impact.

Michelle Ockers:
Fantastic. Anything else that you'd like to share, Shai?

Shai Desai:
No, I think that's great. If you go a step further and you do have an interest in mental models, then, obviously, there are features in the site that allow you to build your own lattice work, add your notes in. And then even test your own knowledge on them. So we built a small learn functionality that helps people do recalls, spaced recall all the time just to help them build a framework. They can keep adding models in and take models out of that lattice work if they want to. So if you want to go that step further, then, obviously, that's the way to go.

Michelle Ockers:
Nice and is spaced recall a mental mode?

Arun Pradhan:
Yeah, absolutely. Yes, it is. And one of the ways ... We've got spaced retrieval on the site. And then we also have the Lietner system, which is the flashcard system, which is often used in algorithms. And that's the algorithm that we've actually adopted as part of the evolution of our site as well. So they're both mental models on our site now.

Michelle Ockers:
Fantastic. Well, I'm looking forward to being able to work more fluidly with mental models, thanks to ModelThinkers. So, thank you for developing those. I've got one final question for each of you. So, let's start with yourself, Arun, what's one thing you've gotten better at in 2020 and how did this happen?

Arun Pradhan:
So, I got better at ping pong and it's because just before lockdown, my partner and I were discussing it. We saw it coming and we thought, "Okay." And we ordered a ping pong table. So, it's deliberate practice.

Michelle Ockers:
That's so funny. My daughter and I were looking for some things to keep ourselves amused during the initial stage of lockdown. And we've got a big wooden dining table so we went to Target, one of the local shops, thinking we could buy a net and some bats and play ping pong on the table. And, of course, by the time we got there, there was just about nothing left in the stores. We bought Nerf guns instead and had Nerf gun battles in the garden.

Arun Pradhan:

See, my partner's banned Nerf guns because we always find about 30 bullets just lying around in our food and stuff later.

Michelle Ockers:

So, Shai, what's one thing you've gotten better at in 2020 and how did it happen?

Shai Desai:

Oh, certainly. We've gotten into cards so we play a lot of card games at home and we use the mental model of de-risking. So, where to take chances or not take chances and understand the situation. So, it's a good, quick mental break for us, but it's also something that we apply to when want to take a break and gotten better at this year.

Michelle Ockers:

Nice. And I bet you when people listen to this episode and start thinking about the way they think, the way they work, they'll discover they're using mental models all the time. So it's an opportunity to be more conscious in our use of it and expand our critical thinking and problem solving. So, thank you both for sharing that with us and for bringing ModelThinkers to world.

Arun Pradhan:

Thank you so much, Michelle. I really appreciate your support.

Shai Desai:

Appreciate it.

ReThink Learning – A Message from Michelle Ockers

I created Rethink Learning to help learning teams and learning professionals with this challenge. The barriers to learning innovation are lower than ever. Now is the time to engage business stakeholders, embed good design practices, work in agile ways and use technology more effectively.

ReThink Learning will accelerate the shift in mindset, skills, practices and tools you need to quickly design and develop effective learning solutions for the virtual environment. You can apply it to your work immediately to redesign of an existing solution or design a new solution as you learn.

For more information on ReThink Learning check out https://bit.ly/ReThinkLearning.

About Michelle Ockers

Michelle Ockers works with business and learning leaders to realise the untapped potential of learning in organisations. She is an organisational learning strategist and modern workplace learning practitioner. Michelle works with organisations to develop and implement transformative organisational learning strategy, and to build the capability of their learning team. She delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events. Michelle also mentors learning professionals at all career stages on career planning and professional development.

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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