

Learning Uncut Episode 79
Highly Engaging Blended Virtual Learning - Neil von Heupt
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

This episode is out on 25 May 2021. A week ago Learning Uncut became more than a podcast. The podcast serves learning professionals around the globe, recently reaching the milestone of over 100,000 downloads across 105 countries. Thank you to all of our guests who have generously shared their stories on the podcast and to all of you, the listeners who find their stories valuable.

Reflecting the growth of both the podcast and my business, I'm pleased to announce that the business is now called *Learning Uncut*. I invite you to visit the new online home for both the podcast and the business at learninguncut.global. Of course, you can continue to listen to the podcast on your favourite app – nothing changes there.

I have another invitation for you as a learning professional. We've kicked off the 'My L&D Why' story sharing campaign. This is a global exploration of why people work in L&D. You are invited to share a story that illustrates why you work in L&D and listen to the stories of others. We're using an app called Storytagger to gather these stories. Just download the app, enter the code MYLDWHY (that's M-Y-L-D-W-H-Y) and follow the prompts. See the show notes for more information.

Now, to today's podcast episode.

I'm welcoming back Neil Von Heupt. When Neil was the Program Manager at the Australian Institute of Training and Development he joined us on Episode 17 to discuss professional development practices for learning professionals. Neil is now the Senior Learning Designer at the Social Media College. He joins us to talk about the college's Social Media Marketing Intensive, a blended learning program which is delivered fully online. The Intensive was highly commended in the Australian Institute of Training and Developments 2020 Excellence Awards.

Neil encourages us to rethink participant engagement and support in virtual learning programs. He describes how spaces and experiences are crafted in the Intensive to generate psychological safety, and high peer and facilitator support. The Intensive uses a wide range of learning approaches and activities as part of the blended design. The program takes participants beyond content, skills and techniques to generate a rhythm, energy and mindset that reflects what they need to do to succeed in the real world of social media marketing.

If you are seeking to create virtual learning environments that provide high support and high engagement there will be something you can apply or adapt from this Learning Uncut episode.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to Learning Uncut, Neil, or should I say welcome back to Learning Uncut.

Neil Von Heupt:

Thank you. So good to be here. I'm excited.

Michelle Ockers:

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Oh, me too. It's always a pleasure to speak with you. And today, we're talking about the Social Media Marketing Intensive from the Social Media College. Congratulations on the program being highly commended in the Australian Institute of Training and Development's Excellence Awards in 2020 for blended learning, I believe.

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah, I was pretty happy about that actually because I've had to watch the awards from the sides when I was working there, and so it was—and I got a really good understanding of how good stuff has to be to win those awards. So I was stoked, and we got beaten by the Navy, but they're the largest RTO (Registered Training Organisation) in Australia with the largest budget in Australia, so I was really happy to be beaten by them.

Michelle Ockers:

Wow, that's true. I mean, I watched—because, of course, the awards ceremony being the COVID year was done online—delivered online, so I was watching, and I saw you and your team leap up when you were highly commended, so great excitement.

Neil Von Heupt

0:01:11 Yeah, we were so excited. We were all together for a planning day, and then the stuff was in the middle of it. So, yeah, we literally did jump up.

Michelle Ockers:

You did literally. So and you, of course, are not as big as the navy. Tell us a little bit about the Social Media College, who you are and what you do and who you do it for?

Neil Von Heupt:

Sure. So I'm the Senior Learning Designer there. Social Media College, we want to change the world, and we want to do that by teaching people how to do social media marketing. And we're still—I still think of us in startup mode. So it was founded in 2014, but our headspace is really startup entrepreneurial lean startup mode. And that actually influenced the development process of the Intensive. But yeah, it's a great space. It's a small team that's about—well, that's probably 10 or 12 of us all up kind of thing, and we have a whole bunch of contractors and overseas people who work with us, which is fabulous. So it's a really good team.

Michelle Ockers:

So some of the challenges that learning development professionals in bigger organisations face around stakeholder engagement and getting business cases up and buy-in on things. I imagine an organisation your size works quite differently with the way decisions get made.

Neil Von Heupt:

Yes. I so don't miss that part of it. Just being—yeah, we're fast and agile and all of those nice buzz words, but that actually are how we work. The running joke is building the aeroplane while we fly it. We go from concept to project in a flash. It's so fast, and we're developing things that we've already pitched to the market to make sure that there's actually people out there interested in buying it, and then we build it after that, which was quite a different process for me.

I'm used to starting with the design, but in the world of marketing, you actually start with is there an audience for your product first, and actually—so you've got to—you build the overall structure and the concept of the product first before you actually get in there and build the content of it. And you go out there with the concept and the structure and see if there's an audience that's interested in that, and then you actually build the content to fit into all of that. So yes, it's a really interesting process. It's grown on me, actually.

Michelle Ockers:

So we might come back to the idea of building the aeroplane while you're flying it when we talk about design. So you mentioned about going to market. Who are the participants for—obviously, you're an education provider in the social media marketing space. Who are your participants? Who do you serve?

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah, it's interesting. We build our personas as good marketers, and a lot of the people who are doing particularly the Intensive are women who are starting their own businesses, and they really want to know how to use social media marketing to boost what's happening in their business. And the thing with a niche, I guess, is that whilst you might target that niche, other people come in. So we use a lot of social media marketing to actually promote our courses. So we're all over—all of these—all of the various social media channels, but it's more about the paid advertising. So the people who end up coming into the course have gone through a pretty extensive process to end up in the course.

So they initially had to do a quiz which can take them probably 20 minutes to do the quiz, and then I have to have a conversation with our head sales guy, Adam, who's amazing at just making sure that the people who end up in the course that the course is exactly what they need. We have a crazy completion rate for what is effectively an online and live virtual course, which is, it sits at about 98%. We've had nobody drop out of this intensive program yet. We've had a couple of people have to shift intakes over time. They get started and go, "Oh, I really wasn't aware of the workload or something's changed in their life," but they're so keen by the time they get to start the course. They just shift to subsequent intakes, so we do intakes every month, and that just works really well.

Michelle Ockers:

So it sounds like part of what makes that work is the participants screening and making sure that you've got something that's really going to meet their needs and expectations.

Neil Von Heupt:

Yes, definitely.

Michelle Ockers:

In terms of the biggest bigger business challenges, if the college was set up in 2014, if you put aside for a moment the specific participants who come along, what's the bigger business challenge that the college helps to meet and why is that important?

Neil Von Heupt:

One of the reasons that the college was started up was because the numbers around social media are just nuts. It's like a third of the world's population are active social media users. People are spending hours every day on social media. But what we found was that the organisations were struggling to get people who actually had the skills for social media marketing. So they've got—some of them had their existing marketing teams, but they didn't have skills in social media marketing. And so the social media marketing role is like in the top ten fastest-growing job roles in Australia and possibly in America too, actually, if I remember correctly. But they just couldn't get enough qualified people who had the skills that they need, and that was actually the driving force.

So the Intensive was originally built as a self-paced course. That was the first product of the college, and we've got a bunch of partners who deliver that. And then, from that original Intensive, they came back to us and said, "Hey, can you give us an actual ASQA qualification?" And so from the original Intensive, we built a Diploma in Social Media Marketing, and that's now delivered through 40 plus different universities and colleges and TAFEs around Australia as that's our partner network. And from the Diploma, we then came back and said, "Okay, what can we do to level up the original Intensive?" And that's where the Intensive Live came from—was a rework of the original Intensive into the live virtual format.

Michelle Ockers:

It's interesting to look at the arc of this program over time, starting off as a self-paced program and moving into the qualifications framework, and then out again spawning off, and I'm sure the qualifications, the diploma still exists. Before we really—

Neil Von Heupt:

That was the last three months. That's why it's still—yeah, we've just gone through the first like the five-year reaccreditation process, completely reviewed and rewritten, the whole Diploma. That's what's—that's where my head has been underwater for the last three months.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. So let's talk about that for a moment because there's a couple of things you touch on there. And as a small business owner, I've previously considered offering formal qualifications myself, and it's not a decision to be taken lightly, also the rigour around the accreditation. So particularly for people outside of Australia now, the Australian Qualifications Framework (AQF) is the government framework that underpins the national system of qualifications in Australia. So if you're going to offer accredited training, formerly recognised training, you need to be registered as a training organisation, and there's quite a lot of regulatory oversight over what you're doing. So it's not for the faint-hearted. You want to make sure, if you're a business, that there's a real need to go down that path. So why did the Social Media College, as a small organisation, go down the path of creating a diploma and having to go through all that rigour in the AQF?

Neil Von Heupt:

It was really about demand. So we'd set up the intensive as the self-paced one, and there was just so much demand for it in the partners who were delivering it. And they just wanted—they wanted a formal qualification. I mean, we weren't looking to go into that space initially, but the demand was so strong. It just made complete sense, even given the amount of extra work that's involved in it.

The other—I think the other challenge was there's a few other places who are offering social media training, and there wasn't any benchmark to say, "Okay, what does it mean that you've got this certificate or you've done this course?" So having a Diploma course meant that people were able to go, "Ah, okay. We know that there's a minimum standard that these people will be able to do, and we can go and check what it says." So it's actually written down and spelt out to say, this is what this person will be able to do in social media marketing, from strategy to content design, all the different platforms that you might be on. Yeah, I guess that's the big advantage with the VET sector stuff. It's just that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. If you're an organisation looking to hire in skills, you know what you're getting if you're getting something that's being earned underneath a formal qualification. So the Intensive, of course, which we want to focus on is not a formal qualification. So clearly, there was a demand for non-accredited training.

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah. I wouldn't say it was a demand for non-accredited. It was partly a demand for faster. So the diploma is like a 12-month program. It's a long course, and people just wanted to do it faster. So the Intensive was initially modelled a bit on Seth Godin's altMBA program, which is a four-week intensive, and you're on for a couple of sessions every week, and it's jammed in there. I think it's a little bit cheeky calling it an altMBA when you do it in four weeks.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, but Seth Godin is a little bit cheeky right Neil.

Neil Von Heupt:

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Yeah, that's right. I'm okay with cheeky. But that idea of something just laser-focused and intense, like jamming a whole lot of stuff into that Intensive. Now, that's not in one sense the whole intensive program. If you enrol in Intensive, you're actually enrolling in a 12-month learning experience. The Intensive itself is the nine-week block. It is at the start of that, but it's not just kind of let's do all of this stuff in nine weeks, and then off you go and do it. So there's this ongoing support that runs out over a 12-month period. So anybody who's doing the Intensive also has access to all of the asynchronous self-paced content online.

We don't typically give them that access until after the Intensive because it just blows their brain if we give them the virtual live content and the self-paced stuff at the same time. So after they're finished, they can go back, and can review the content. They can go into it in greater depth in the online content, plus there's this ongoing coaching that happens afterwards. So there's twice-weekly coaching sessions that they can just log into and tap into our facilitators. Again, just if they're stuck on something, we have a dedicated—what's called the Facebook tribe - which is all of the graduates of the Intensive or the Diploma are in this tribe together. And if somebody has a question, they just post it into the tribe, and people just—people are hugely generous in there and just offer their expertise. And our mentors have an ongoing relationship with the students, so it's not just about jamming everything into the nine weeks. But those nine weeks, they are intense, so they're on for two virtual sessions every week, and they've got stuff to do in between the sessions. And that's part of the process that leads into the course is making sure that people understand the level of demand.

That's part of Adam's job is to make sure that people understand that they're gonna lockout two evenings each week. They've got to make sure that the kids are organised and that their house is organised. And between those sessions, there's gonna be work that they need to do, and it's got a really high level of accountability as well. So the—when each virtual session is finished, there's something that they need to go away and do something practical. And they're paired with somebody else who's doing the Intensive in their intake, different pairs each week, and they actually have 24 hours to complete the activity, submit it to their partner for feedback before they submit it back to the whole group.

So that level of accountability just keeps everybody on track. And if they miss a session, then they get a call from the facilitator who actually rings them and says, "Hey, we missed you. Are you okay? Is everything okay?" It's like they get one get out of jail free card which they can play during the nine weeks, which is to say, "Something's happened. I can't make the session tonight." Otherwise, the expectation is that they're there every single time because it impacts the learning of others. It's not just about their learning, but if there's less people there, then it's less dynamic. When we use the breakout rooms, it may not work as well with less people in it, but all that kind of stuff. But they love it. It's really interesting.

Michelle Ockers:

So have you faced a situation where somebody has used a get out of jail free card, and then you can't make another session? And how do you handle that? What does that look like?

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah, we have. Everybody uses a get out of jail free card at some point. There's probably some people who haven't missed any—actually, no, it's probably the other way around. It's intense, but yeah, if you miss something, you totally feel like you've missed something like something good because the experience within the virtual classrooms, it's just like this. Yeah, there's between 10 and 15 people in the intakes, and so the experience within the sessions is very personal. You notice when somebody's not there. You miss them, and because you—it's almost like bonding through trauma stuff. It's so intense. The people in each intake, they often kick on as a group like they set up their own Facebook groups just to stay in touch with each other. They've shared each other's lives for the last nine weeks, and they stay in contact, and we can see it because they'll invite us into their groups, and we just see the chat that's ongoing and the support they give each other is crazy like it's so good.

Michelle Ockers:

What strikes me, it feels like it's this environment of high stakes and high support both side by side.

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah, totally, yeah. For me, I've always designed learning experiences with a big emphasis on a safe psychological space, and I had to, I guess, coach our facilitators in what I expected that to look like to the point where we have slides up in the first session which specifically say, this is a safe psychological space. And the facilitators know—we do occasionally—we get people who get a bit narky in some of the sessions, and that will generally mean a follow-up from the facilitator after like if the facilitator's not happy with somebody's behaviour in the session, then they call them out on it in private. They'll contact them privately and just say, "You just can't do that." If you have a problem, all good, talk to me about it. But in the sessions, we've got to keep that space so that everybody feels comfortable. Everybody's happy to ask questions. Everybody's happy to show that they've made mistakes and talk about them without any fear of ridicule. We have stuff up about you can choose your pronouns in this group. We have this inclusive, diverse space and say everyone is safe in this space, and that's a really important part of creating that virtual learning environment is creating that space for people.

Michelle Ockers:

Interesting. That whole idea of creating space and how you set that up, and it takes time and thought to craft that, right?

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah, totally, yes. And it's something—I talk about a fair bit, I guess, but one of the things that I say to the facilitators is that in order to create a safe space, you have to be a safe space yourself. And so that keeps them mindful of the sort of comments that they make. I mean, one of our presenters is—he does stand-up comedy on the side. He's a funny guy, but he's mindful of that when he's facilitating, and he's cracking jokes all the time, and it's great. And I love it, and sometimes he will nudge up against the edge of what's okay for people, but that's actually part of the space as well is for him because that's who he is. If he does go a bit close, he's aware enough to go, "Oh hang on, T, I may have gone a bit too far with that last comment." And he'll apologise in the session.

So part of that is a modelling that it's okay to make mistakes here. And so if the Zoom meeting crashes or somebody's having tech issues, then we don't mock them about it. We just accept that this is part of life. If you're going to work in social media land, you're working with a reasonably high degree of tech, and it's not always going to work. And how you handle it and how you handle when other people are having those problems is super important.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So the facilitators are sending message through their own behaviour obviously right throughout.

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

So when we think about crafting spaces and crafting experiences, and you've given us a flavour of some of the activities that are involved for the participants. If you look at the biggest sweep over this, and I know it extends into the support and other spaces over 12 months, but it's nine-week intensive period. What does that—if you zoom back out a little bit, what are you trying to move the participants through, and where do you want them to reach at the end of that nine weeks? What does that look like? I'm trying not to use the word journey now, but I'm failing miserably, so I'm just gonna say, what's the journey you're trying to take the participants through in that nine weeks?

Neil Von Heupt:

So part of—I guess that the journey is not so much about content but around getting people to understand what's possible across all of the different networks that people access and developing strategy and how do they go about problem-solving and how do they build a network that's going to be able to support them afterwards and how do they ask questions? So yeah, the learner journey, it's interesting. I mean, they cover a massive amount of content, but it's partly about experiencing social media marketing. It's intense, and so when you—if you can get through the Intensive, you can probably get through working in social media marketing, it's a bit unpredictable, the hours are odd. You've got it—you're on all the time because you can't just make a post and then just leave it and come back to it in a couple of days. You've got to be actively monitoring it. You've got to be doing the community management stuff

around, looking at the comments, and what sort of engagement you've got.

So the learning experience actually reflects what they're going to need to be able to do when they get out in the real world, which is juggle a whole lot of variables and juggle a whole lot of different networks that people are on and juggle a whole lot of number crunching and get creative at the same time in terms of coming up with images and concepts. So it's intense across the Intensive. That's why we call it the intensive. But that actually positions them so that when they finish that intense period, they almost say—they're raving at the end - just go, I'm so keen. People get their clients before they even finish the Intensive. They're so pumped, and they're just—they're talking about it all the time, they're talking about it with existing clients. And then suddenly we just get somebody pop into the WhatsApp chat and say, "I've just got my first client." and we're like, "Seriously, you haven't even finished the course. Yeah, that's amazing." Because they're pumped, they're excited, they've caught the energy of the world of social media marketing. They've communicated that out to somebody out there whether or not it's the local butcher or the—or a corporate setting, and somebody's gone, "You clearly have the skills and energy that we're looking for."

Michelle Ockers:

So it's interesting. It's not just about content, skills, techniques. It's also about mindset and energy and a rhythm that you create with these rapid turnarounds of activities and getting them out for feedback. And you've got a commitment to show up because in the real world of social media marketing, you've got to show up, and you've got to keep showing up. So I really like that idea that you've set it up to reflect the environment that they'll be doing it in for real, and I would imagine there's plenty of opportunity to apply right throughout the program as well in the real world.

Neil Von Heupt:

Absolutely. So the—that's another one of the design principles is that they learn by doing it, so there's literally activities where the title is, let's do it. And so they learn about content, and then they have to do something with it. So when they're learning about LinkedIn and how to optimise their profile, then they have to go and optimise their profile, take a screenshot of it, send it to their partner for feedback. I often give people feedback, like I will make a comment in the WhatsApp group just saying, "If you want me to have a look over your LinkedIn profile, then just connect with me on LinkedIn and I'll go and have a look and give you feedback on it." So yeah, it's very practical.

When we—when we're doing Twitter, we actually run a live Twitter chat so that they're on Twitter. And for some of them, Twitter's one of the fringe networks they haven't quite clued in to that yet because they're often in—they've come in through the door of Instagram and Facebook and very visual networks. But yeah, we run a live Twitter chat so that they're actually on there and they're retweeting, and they're learning all of the different functions of Twitter when they're on Instagram. They've got to go out and get onto Canva and choose an image from Unsplash and do a text overlay onto it and then decide whether or not it's going to be entertaining or educating or inspiring or persuasive. And then screenshot it, share it with their partner for feedback, share it into the main WhatsApp chat so that people can see it.

0:30:01 Yeah, it's very practical, what they have to do, and it's using the tools they're going to use every day. It's like they're going to have an Instagram account. They're going to open up a Facebook business account. They've got—and there's—one of the interesting things that I like is we do these what we call a walk-through video. So it's pretty easy to, in one sense to talk about how to do Facebook business manager or Facebook ads. But sometimes, you actually just need somebody to open up Facebook ads manager and step you through how it works. And so we use Loom for that, and either our facilitators join or our CEO will record these walk-through videos just to take them step-by-step through the process so that afterwards, when they're setting up their own one, they can actually go back to these videos and just stop it at the point and go, "That's not working. What am I doing wrong?" And they can go back into these videos and find them.

Michelle Ockers:

It feels like it lends itself quite readily to performance support resources and things being available on an ongoing basis.

Neil Von Heupt:

We also give them a lot of templates and checklists. And so when you're talking about performance support things, in each of the courses, there's a bunch of templates about how do you set up your strategy, how do you plan out your Instagram grid, a checklist of these are all the things you need to make sure you've covered in your LinkedIn profile. Whatever they are, there's some tools that they can use afterwards.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. In terms of the live online events, the virtual facilitated events, we saw this huge rush last year, and a lot of learning in organisations was still being done face-to-face in classrooms, either just in classrooms or as part of blended learning programs. And all of a sudden, the classrooms were denied to us, so we had to move everything into that online environment. And I think we've seen mixed levels of success with what good might look like and whether we've got good practice happening in virtual classrooms. So walk me through what a typical—how long is that? Did you put people in virtual classrooms for eight hours? How long are they? And how do you create a high quality live online engagement?

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah. I guess it starts before they even get there. So in the lead up to the sessions, I mean once they're started, they've got things that they're doing in between each sessions. But before they even get to the first one, there's a build-up. So there's a series of emails and videos that come out prior to the Intensive just getting their headspace in. And probably in the—so the sessions are two hours long, and they are spaced typically a couple of days apart. Sometimes, they're evening sessions - 6:00 to 8:30. Sometimes, they're daytime sessions - 12 to 2. But they have a build-up to them. And in the first session, probably, the first hour of that first session is just about getting their head and their heart around what they're about to jump into before they get even close to content. And so that shapes the virtual experience. When they come in that first time, they're excited, like they're stoked to be there.

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During the day before they start, there's a WhatsApp group. So, all of the Intensive groups have a dedicated WhatsApp discussion. And so that opens up the day before they get started, and you can just see by the way they respond in that WhatsApp group that they're excited, they're pumped about doing this course, and so that feeds into the virtual thing.

We open the rooms 15 minutes before they actually get started, and there's just a couple of questions on screen to get people chatting. The facilitator's just sitting there just like that would in a face-to-face environment. So I mean, if we're delivering a course in the a.m. (morning) and the course starts at 9, then our facilitators have to get there at 8, and they've done all their preparation. They've just got to sit there and be in the room. They've got to put some music on. They've got to create that space so that people walk into a physical space and go, "This is going to be good." That's the same that we have with the virtual environment is people have to not just click on the link for Zoom and then just be sitting in a blank screen waiting room, waiting for the host to let them in. The host is always like—15 minutes, the host is always there before they arrive, and they're chatting. As soon as they jump in, they chat away, and that's questions on screen that they answer in the chat.

We use all of the tools that you can play with in Zoom. So that was—the facilitators had to learn how to use polls and had to learn how to use the breakout rooms, how to learn how to use the annotation and the whiteboard and all that stuff. And that's important. Like people just—I guess they think about engagement—what's the word? Not wrongly. It's just poorly, I think, sometimes, when we think about engagement in particularly online but virtual classrooms where they've got them clicking on things a lot online. I can't stand people clicking on things and—

Michelle Ockers:

Certainly for e-learning. You know what I notice sometimes with virtual facilitation is a tendency to do more of the same. So we'll just do breakout rooms, and we'll just use chat. So—

Neil Von Heupt:

You've got to design—

Michelle Ockers:

You can get stuck in a rut, right?

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah, totally. It's not a face-to-face session in the sense that you're in a classroom of people. You've actually got a design quite specifically for the virtual environment, and it—I would say it moves a bit faster than a face-to-face environment in terms of the stuff that you've got on screen. And the activities, and the spread of activities during a session, there's probably more of them than there are in a face-to-face session, and the nature of those activities changes as well, so for us, for example, the social learning element of the learning experience is really important. And that comes through the WhatsApp group that they have. It comes through the design of the activities where they're actually working with other people, and talking and talking with the whole group and summarising things and sharing their responses with the

group. And when that's wrapped in that safe psychological space, that stuff really works. And they do learn from each other. They do support each other when the space has been created to do that.

Michelle Ockers:

Two other things I'm finding with virtual facilitation is individual reflection and making some space and time for individual reflection to consolidate thinking either before or after other activities. Sometimes, just giving people some space to collect their thoughts before you invite them to interact with others can improve the quality of the interaction as well. And there's some really nice structures. There's a site called Liberating Structures (I'll put a link to the show notes) that have different kinds of activities that you can run, and you can think about what are you actually trying to achieve, which is my second point is design as with design of anything with the use of tech or design of activities in a face-to-face environment, you need to be thinking about the purpose of it and what you're trying to achieve first and then picking the tool or the activity to support that, right?

Neil Von Heupt:

So you've got the virtual space, and then you've got the online space which they can get in afterwards, but we also have a workbook, and it's a digital workbook. But in that workbook is space for notes and thoughts and ideas, and we'll be very happy with the idea that there's action plan steps. So structurally, a course typically has eight modules in it. At the end of—so there's ten different courses that they cover over the nine weeks. But at the end of each module, they actually have to write down and say, "What are you going to do with this? What are your action plan?" They're trigger-action plans. So they actually have to identify what it is they're going to do, and then they have to identify the context or the trigger where they're going to most likely need to do that action. And then, even at the end of a course, a course might run across two sessions, they've got all of those action plan points, but they then have to prioritise those action plan points from a one to ten. And then, they have a prioritisation matrix where they map their action plan points on according to the ease of implementation and the value that they deliver.

Michelle Ockers:

I think the other that thing this program nicely illustrates as well, which I think is one of the big advantages of more utilisation of the virtual facilitation is we can now—because we're not having to bring people physically together all the time, there's not as much reliance on physically bringing people together—we can spread out the learning experience over a longer period of time. And it's not just around how do you support people to learn in the virtual space when you're together. What can they then go and do out in the real world to bring back in? So the learning space as such, it's far more easy to incorporate and extend it into the day-to-day real-world activities that people are doing.

Neil Von Heupt:

Anybody doing it also comes in—they have to choose. It's always referred to as your chosen organisation, so they come in. A lot of them already have an organisation that they want to work on right across the intensive, and that might be a startup business that they're doing. It might currently be a side gig that they want to expand.

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Highly Engaging Blended Virtual Learning - Neil von Heupt
Hosted by Michelle Ockers

It might be an existing business that they're trying to build up their revenue for. And so those—all of the activities are actually tailored around there. In one sense, everybody's doing this personalised project right across. So from the first sessions where they're looking at strategy, they actually have to write the social media strategy for their chosen organisation.

And then, they have a mentor call, and so the mentors—some of our social media people who run their own agencies, they will just sit down and take an hour with these people to actually step through what they're doing in their strategy and give them ideas and give them feedback on it. At the end of the nine weeks, they also do a presentation which is the fleshed-out version of the strategy. So they design the strategy early on, then they learn about all of the different networks that they could be working on and at the end, they've got to make a choice because you won't typically be on every network. You'll pick one, and you put your energy into that. And then, at the end, they do a presentation to the whole group, which scares the pants off most of them. And we give them a lot of support around that. They have another call with the mentors in week eight to actually go through that. I offer them support if they're struggling with PowerPoint or if they need proofreading stuff. So it's like you said before, like it's high—I forget your phrasal verbs, actually.

Michelle Ockers:

High stakes and high support.

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah, high stakes and high support, yeah. There's a lot of support. And even on the final session, we celebrate, and we have drinks with them. So they're told in advance to turn up to the last session with a drink ready. There's an image of champagne glasses on the slide in the previous session. And in that last session, a bunch of the extended people who've been involved in the process, we all just jump on, it's just 15 minutes, it happens at any time of day or night. I always dress up. I actually go and put the tux on and the bow tie.

Michelle Ockers:

And I cannot imagine it now.

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah. And sit here on Zoom. But we all just jump in, and we celebrate the conclusion of that nine-week period. And Adam, the guy who originally enrolled him in the course, will jump in there and Juliana, who's been helping them in the what—anybody who's available from the team will jump into that. John and Danny doesn't matter where they are, they'll just jump onto Zoom, and we'll just jump in and celebrate with them that they've done it. So it's much—like their experience is much beyond the facilitator and what's happening in the virtual classroom.

Michelle Ockers:

So tips for others who would like to get started or to do more with creating these high-quality blended learning experiences. What tips would you have for them by—and I know you've mentioned quite a few along the way, but by way of summary, what would be your key tips for others?

Neil Von Heupt:

I would say to rethink engagement. What you think engagement is in your learning experiences? We've done things the same way for a long time, and it can be hard to step out of that if you've worked in the e-learning industry if you've been a face-to-face deliverer for 20 years of your career. It can be hard to move beyond that. The quickest way to become an old dog is to stop learning new tricks. And so rethink what it means to engage your learners in creative ways. And for me, the starting point was to say, "Okay, if you can't do all of the things that you would traditionally do, what would you do?" so throw it all out and then go, "What am I going to bring back in?" That would be one thing.

The other thing would be around content would be to just go all out with your content. And it's not just about writing it, but just use every possible medium that you can find.

Neil Von Heupt:

The third would be to blend. And so, when you're looking at setting up virtual classrooms, do not just think about setting up virtual classrooms. So for us, a virtual classroom is supported by online content. It's supported by a workbook. It's supported by social learning experiences using social media. We have a Facebook group and WhatsApp dedicated things for the tribe. So that was one of the things—I mean, the blended learning award is the toughest one in the AITD (Australian Institute of training and Development) Awards, so I was doubly happy to get the result that we did was because we'd worked really hard to actually blend all of that learning theory around connectivism and constructivism alongside the basic stuff of behaviourism and cognitivism, and just like throw everything at it. Like, don't just think a virtual classroom. Think about what's gonna be wrapped around that virtual classroom that will make it work. I'm pretty happy with those three, actually.

Michelle Ockers:

I think you've given people lots of options to think about today, Neil. And for me, the key message—well, there's lots of key messages, but one of them, the one around content, is more about loosening up a little bit and thinking more creatively and approaching with a bit of a sense of freedom.

Neil Von Heupt:

Yeah. I mean, marketers are out there every single day, and they are working their butts off to grab your attention. Social media markets—like you're sitting there scrolling through your thing, and their job is to make you stop. And I think if learning professionals don't understand that context, then they create boring learning materials. There's people out there who are all day, every day, trying to catch your attention, and then there's learning designers, and there's often a vast divide between the two. I've learned so much from the marketers in terms of how I do learning design and how I develop learning experiences because they totally understand their audience. They put so much work into their personas and understanding who—that's totally made my learning design better, what I've learned from the marketers.

Michelle Ockers:

Well, maybe the episode should be subtitled what L&D can learn from marketers. Thanks so much, Neil, for sharing your work with us today. I'll include a link to your LinkedIn profile if anyone would like to get in touch with you to find out more about the topics discussed in today's episode.

And to our Learning Uncut listeners, thank you for being part of Learning Uncut. We have recently gone through the 100 000 downloads for Learning Uncut as we approach our third year. And you may notice listeners that we have a new home. As of this episode, we are now on the website, learninguncut.global. We have a new look. So go out and check us out at learninguncut.global. Thanks for being our first episode published in real-time on learninguncut.global, Neil.

Neil Von Heupt

Wow. That's exciting. Thank you. Thank you for having me. That's so good.

Michelle Ockers:

Thank you.

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3. Enter the code MYLDWHY
4. Follow the prompts to record your story.

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About Learning Uncut



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

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

Learn more about us [at our website](#).

About your host, Michelle Ockers



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

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

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



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