

Learning Uncut Episode 80
An Empathic, Effective Learning Journey – Erin Mariano
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

I'm speaking with learning designer Erin Mariano about a learning journey she developed for a South African logistics company, Unitrans. As a learning professional, especially one who works on contract to a range of organisations, you are sometimes engaged to develop a solution for an industry, subject domain or audience with whom you are unfamiliar. This was the situation that Erin found herself in when asked to develop this solution for truck drivers. In a move that she describes as a 'game changer' she donned her safety boots and fluoro vest and hit the road with some drivers. Her exposure to their work context and role, and empathy for them allowed her to design a powerful learning solution that uses simple methodologies in a creative way. This includes storytelling and scenarios with a realistic, beautifully named character, a board game and simple physical and information resources. While the solution is now being digitalised due to COVID, the key elements remain the same.

Before we get into this Episode I have an invitation for you as a learning professional. Learning Uncut is running a global exploration of what brings L&D professionals a sense of meaning and purpose in their work. Until 18 August 2021 we are gathering stories in the 'My L&D Why' campaign. You are invited to share a story that illustrates why you work in L&D, and to listen to the stories of others. We're using an app called Storytagger to gather these stories. Just download the app, create an account using your email, enter the code MYLDWHY (that's M-Y-L-D-W-H-Y) and follow the prompts. See the show notes for more information and listen to the end of this episode for a story.

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome to Learning Uncut Erin.

Erin Mariano:

Hi. Thanks so much, Michelle. And thanks very much for having me.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a pleasure. And I want to big call out, big thank you. You actually went to my website and submitted a suggestion to share your story. And I always appreciate when people come to me with a story. And they've got the courage and confidence to say this might be something worth sharing. So for other learning professionals listening to this, if you're sitting there thinking, "Maybe this is a story that others would be interested in." Please, please, please, approach me on LinkedIn or come to the website and do what Erin did. And see if this is a story that could be of value to others. So thanks for doing that, Erin. It's much appreciated.

Erin Mariano:

Great, thanks. Thanks, Michelle.

Michelle Ockers:

So Erin, you've brought us a story about a client that you worked with. Can you tell us a little bit about what you do, and how you became engaged with this client as a starter?

Erin Mariano:

Absolutely. So I work as a learning and development contractor. And I was put on this

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project through my contract work with a really wonderful skills development and training company in South Africa called VeryCoolIdeas. So I've worked with them as an L&D contractor since 2015. And I've had an opportunity to work on quite a few client projects. And this particular project, the client, which is Unitrans Supply Chain Solutions approached VeryCoolIdeas. And Unitrans is a large, really well-known leading transportation and logistics company that operate in Sub Saharan Africa. And in South Africa, road safety is really an epidemic.

Erin Mariano:

Road accidents are responsible for many, many deaths per year. And trucks often contribute to these high numbers, because when there's a truck accident there are often many fatalities. Unitrans, who take safety and driver training really, really seriously. Melanie, who's the head of people development and culture approached VeryCoolIdeas to develop this learning program for the truck drivers. And I was very, very lucky to be put onto this project.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. Let's talk a little bit more about the road safety issues. Obviously, there is an issue of public responsibility there. In terms of road safety and the context in South Africa, are there any legislative or regulatory requirements, anything else about the context that's relevant to the way you approach this particular learning solution?

Erin Mariano:

So there were two aspects. I mean, obviously there is just the standard responsibility that Unitrans took very, very seriously about obeying road safety rules and regulations. And then there was also a secondary element because some of the truck drivers at Unitrans drove dangerous goods trucks. So they would be transporting petroleum or chemicals, and things like that. And they had a separate set of legislation or rules that they had to follow. Obviously, a lot more stringent.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. And in terms of road safety incidents, what kind of impact do they have on an organization and its people?

Erin Mariano:

So I think definitely from Unitrans' perspective, the truck drivers themselves they have a huge responsibility to play. And the whole idea about this program was about getting home, getting back to your families safely. And we really pitched it from that perspective of as an individual, what role do you play in your organization, in your family, in greater society? And how can you make an impact on helping everybody get home safely at the end of the day?

Michelle Ockers:

So Erin, give us a sense of the timeline here. When were you engaged, and what brief were you given?

Erin Mariano:

Great. So this project actually dates back to 2017. So it's a bit of an older project. But we were engaged in the February of 2017. And that's when Mel approached VeryCoolIdeas and gave us the brief. And it was really around that there were two divisions in the business that were coming together. And therefore, two sets of drivers, truck drivers that were coming together that had different experiences, different training. Different methodologies used. They were now coming together to form this new unit. So the brief we were given was we

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needed something like a unified approach, something exciting and different and really fit for purpose. It was a case of we have a bit of content, but it needs some work.

Erin Mariano:

And part of the brief was also around accreditation, which is a really important aspect, especially in South Africa. We have a similar system to Australia where we have unit standards that act as building blocks to qualifications. And really, because of our terrible history in this country, where non-White people were not given very good quality education. We have so many people in our workforce that have so much experience and skills and knowledge, but don't have any formal recognition of it. And they find it very difficult to move between jobs, or to further themselves.

Erin Mariano:

So it was a wonderful part of the brief, and really excited us when Mel had said to us she would like this to be accredited, because it just creates that building block for the target audience themselves. And then, of course, I think with every aspect of learning, there was an element of time pressure. But I don't think ever taken away from learning and development.

Michelle Ockers:

No, that's true. What sort of timeframe were you given from that February 2017 to when a solution needed to be rolled out?

Erin Mariano:

So it was as soon as possible, and we managed to get it done by the August. So we had our full program, there were two parts to it as I mentioned the normal goods drivers, and then the second element for the dangerous goods drivers. And it was accredited and piloted and tested and everything, and ready for rollout by the end of August.

Michelle Ockers:

So how open was the brief you were given? Was there a solution handed to you and you were asked to develop the solution, or was it more open and you were asked to create the solution and given a lot of flexibility around how to shape the solution?

Erin Mariano:

So there were some specifics around obviously time away from the wheel. At that stage, it was a classroom face-to-face intervention. So we were given some specifics around the timeframe of the training and the learning. We were given that the drivers had to also do two-year refreshers that was legislated, as well as required by the client themselves. Especially the dangerous goods drivers. And then we weren't really given anything very specific. It was just around we need this to be exciting. And we need this to invigorate our drivers. And then obviously the standards, the unit standards from the accreditation aspect gave us some form of specifics.

Michelle Ockers:

So the accreditation standard specified the skills that were needed, and the actions that drivers needed to be able to take back in the workplace, because they are very workplace based in my experience. At least the Australian standards and the way they lay out

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performance requirements. Is that the same with the standards you are working with?

Erin Mariano:

Yes, they're very similar in the sense that they do have the skills, and the actions that the drivers would need to be able to perform to get those credits.

Michelle Ockers:

So what were the key behavioural changes, the solution needed to support the drivers to take?

Erin Mariano:

So it was really a lot around safety. As I mentioned, just ensuring that the drivers ... I mean Unitrans always take safety very seriously. But to just reiterate that with the drivers, ensure that they have that safety attitude, which is always a difficult thing to measure and enhance. But general things like again, just ensuring that they're obeying the rules of the road. Customer service was actually quite an important element as well. That was not something that was part of the unit standard, but was more of a business requirement because we saw that the truck drivers were the people that were interacting with the customers when they got to the destinations. And so how important it was for the drivers to understand that they were Unitrans at the end of the day.

Erin Mariano:

What they did, how they spoke, how they dressed, really represented the business. And then they also wanted to ensure that they improved their stats in their driving. So from a telemetry side of things, they have very monitored vehicles. They monitor the speed, they monitor hard braking. All of those types of things. So they wanted to see an improvement in that. And then when I talk about safety, I also talk about the drivers' behaviour in terms of obeying the rules of the road. But also safety skills such as first aid, and being able to deal with hijacking situations or fires in the vehicle. So there were a lot of elements that were sought to change.

Michelle Ockers:

It's actually a really broad scope that you're trying to cover off here in the one program. So when you started doing your analysis, where did you start? What did you do when you started working on this project?

Erin Mariano:

Yeah. So the first thing was to look at what was in place already. That's always a great starting point. And so we got all of that information. And it was really a huge learning curve for me. It was the first time I had ever been exposed to heavy duty trucking. So there was a lot of terminology and things that I learned. That was the first point. The second point was to hold quite a number of involved scoping sessions. And we involved a number of people from executives, all the way down to the trainers that would be training the programs, as well as the drivers themselves. And that gave us a really broad understanding of the business requirement, understanding what currently worked and what didn't work. Understanding what they wanted, and also just understanding the business environment itself.

Michelle Ockers:

So how did you go about running those scoping sessions? You want to describe what they

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typically looked like?

Erin Mariano:

Sure. So we actually, we held them in Johannesburg and we video conferenced other people from Cape Town. There were some other people from Africa, because the drivers were all over the place at the time. So some of them were face-to-face, some of them were held virtually. And it's really around the ... we have a structure at VeryCoolIdeas to really unpack who is the target audience. And really understand who the target audience is. For example, to do a bit of a SWOT analysis on the current scenario, the current training. So again, just to get that understanding of what works, what doesn't work. So it's really a very broad conversation of me going in there asking these questions, starting a bit of a conversation and then really absorbing what comes out. And really listening to the real message.

Erin Mariano:

Sometimes it's what is not always said, but is in the room. And sometimes it can be a little bit of a shopping list, where depending on who you talk to in the organization, people want X, Y, and Z. And when you talk to different people at different levels, you start to understand and unpack what that really means and what it could really look like. So from those scoping sessions, it just helps to start to create a picture of this learning journey that I wanted to create.

Michelle Ockers:

What did you learn about the drivers? Who the drivers were, what their characteristics were, maybe a bit about their work context through this process, the scoping process?

Erin Mariano:

So we certainly learned a lot. Learned about the diversity, the age diversity was probably one of the most interesting things. Some of the drivers had been with the company for many, many years. There wasn't too much of a gender diversity, but they were including more and more female drivers. And actually after the scoping session, I was lucky enough to be taken under the wing of one of the driver trainers and put on my fluoro vest and got into a truck. And got really involved to just really understand what it is to be a driver as best as I could, and the conditions in which they work in, the environment they work in. And the pressures and the challenges that they face. And for me, that's the really important part. I really was trying to become the target audience as best as I can to really understand their context.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. So what did you learn about their context in the day-to-day work environment, and maybe some of the pressures they were under or some of the things you needed to consider when you started designing the solution?

Erin Mariano:

Truck driving is really, really intense. That is what I learned. It's a really hard life. A lot of hours on the road. A lot of pressures to meet deadlines, to meet targets and things like that. It's really, really dangerous. And I got a much bigger appreciation for truck drivers. And I certainly look at them a bit differently when I drive past them on the highway. But yeah, very challenging context. Very tiring and the fact that they are actually put in quite a bit of danger. I don't know if it's only a South African or African problem, but truck hijacking is a really real thing. And it's a really scary thing. So I learned a lot about the dangers of their context as

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well.

Michelle Ockers:

Having that level of understanding and empathy for the drivers in this case, how did that influence the way you approached designing the solution and developing the solution?

Erin Mariano:

I think it completely changed it for me, because I felt like I had this level of understanding. And every single thing I did, and every little activity or game, or the way I developed the journey was really always with that in mind. And I think putting on my safety boots and my fluoro vest was a game changer for me, because sitting behind a desk in an office or behind a screen doesn't give you that appreciation of the context. So it really helped me. Yeah, and everything has really been about that context and feeding into that.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. I think it's a really smart move, if you are able to get out into that work environment and spend some time with the people doing the job that you're there to serve. I think it makes a huge difference to how you approach things. So talk to us about the solution itself. Give us an overview of the solution, and the key elements of the solution.

Erin Mariano:

So I always like to use the term creating a learning journey rather than a learning program, because I always feel like it's a bit of an experience rather than just a moment in time. So I used very simple methodologies and strategies. And the first learning methodology that I thought was quite notable is I used storytelling. So I got this idea from just reading, paging through different stories, specifically culturally. African stories and just, I've made the realization of how important storytelling is for learning, for culture, and things like that. So I created this character. It was somebody very real. It was a person with flaws and ambitions. And this person was on a journey.

Erin Mariano:

And then I used real life scenarios that the client provided me with as part of the character story. So every single module started with a new part of this character's journey. And it was part of the whole learning journey and experience, and this character was very real. And some of the drivers in the room had been hijacked, for example. And so when it came to this character story about being hijacked, they could really relate to that. So the character always uphold the client's standards and goals, and became a role model for the truck drivers. It was really quite amazing. And they really followed the story, and became quite invested in it.

Erin Mariano:

And it was really beautiful. We gave the character an African name, which was Siphephile. And the meaning of this is "we're all safe." Yeah. So that was fantastic. Sorry, I don't know if you can hear my dogs barking in the background.

Michelle Ockers:

You know what? I can, but it doesn't matter. And it's actually quite a nice change, because normally it's my dog that barks in the background. So continue, Erin.

Erin Mariano:

Great. And then just a few other key aspects to the solution was that we also used games quite a lot. And again, the most notable one was right at the end of this learning journey, the

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client and I developed this board game where the drivers had to answer questions and things like that to get from point A to point B. Again, the whole point, getting home safely. So they encounter challenges, and things that would throw them off track. But essentially, again, brought in Siphophile, the character and it was all about getting him safely. So it was a really nice way, a very physical way because the drivers were sitting around the board together asking questions, trying to get this character home safely. And so it was a great way to round up everything that they've learned.

Michelle Ockers:

It actually sounds like it was a good peer learning opportunity as well. It sounds like the drivers were discussing the situations that the character was in, and how to address them. So was that part of how it worked?

Erin Mariano:

Yeah, it was definitely part about some of them were very, very knowledge based. For example, a specific rule of the road or perhaps a specific Unitrans regulation or something like that. But yeah, some of them were helping each other get out of a situation, which as you mentioned is a great peer learning example.

Michelle Ockers:

So as you were developing this character and literally the character's journey, how did you go about getting that right so that it was going to resonate with the drivers, it was going to feel realistic, true to context and be engaging? Can you talk to us about that?

Erin Mariano:

I think the most important thing was using real scenarios. It wasn't a scenario that I just thought up in my head. It was something that the client provided me with, and obviously I tweaked in, in the necessary way. But all of the facts were true. So I think that's the first element. The second element is that we had the most fantastic team. And even though we scoped with a really broad team, we worked with a team that was Melanie, the client, as well as some of the trainers, some of the drivers. And the HR and learning team as well. So we were constantly ... I was developing something, and they were then saying, "Okay, I don't know if this was set quite right. Maybe we can change that, maybe we can change that." So it was a constant feedback loop, making sure that everything was fit for purpose, was real life. And that the drivers would respond to it.

Michelle Ockers:

Right. So that constant testing, checking, making sure you had it right. Tweaking, working closely with them.

Erin Mariano:

Yeah.

Michelle Ockers:

Talk to us a bit more about developing a board game. Some of the listeners may have developed a game, some may not have. How do you go about developing a game?

Erin Mariano:

So this was quite a collaboration between the client and myself. And the client used their graphic design team to develop all of the visuals. And she really went all out to develop a beautiful board game that you would probably buy in the shops, with stunning board and

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stunning pieces and everything. And doesn't always have to be that high market, if I can say. It can be pretty simple. But there were a lot of sketches and drawings, and figuring things out. And it started from a very rough place, where as I say we had a piece of paper, how could this journey really work where we really sketched it out. Mel was fantastic in conceptualizing. And she actually did a lot of work with her team, her HR and learning team to help develop that as well. So it certainly wasn't squarely on me. She did a lot of work with her team figuring out the challenges that the drivers might face, and the journey that they're going to take.

Michelle Ockers:

Did you base the board game on an existing game and adapt from anything that was already familiar, or it was just developed from scratch?

Erin Mariano:

Yeah, it was developed from scratch. I mean the idea was taking a journey. So I mean I guess that's borrowed from a lot of board games that you play, but it wasn't taken from anything specific. It was developed from scratch, particularly for this client.

Michelle Ockers:

Okay. What were the key challenges in creating the solution?

Erin Mariano:

I think I was really lucky in that they weren't huge challenges. But I think the largest challenge for me was probably the diversity of the target audience. As I mentioned, it was quite a diverse literacy level. And so that makes it quite difficult. They were drivers that had been working there for many, many years, incredibly intelligent. Do their job really, really well. So much knowledge and skills, but perhaps doesn't have the greatest level of literacy. So that becomes quite challenging when you want to put them into a classroom situation. And especially around accreditation, because there are certain requirements that people do need to meet to get those credits. So yeah, that diversity of literacy, the age diversity as well.

Erin Mariano:

So there was the age diversity as well, where there were some drivers who'd been there for many, many years and were a bit older. And then the new recruits that were quite young. So that was quite challenging. And the way that we addressed that was there was also a lot of peer assistance. So we kept the content very, very simple. So the way in which I developed the content really simple, a lot of pictures, a lot of diagrams, a lot of videos, and those types of resources. And also the assessments, which were their accreditation side of things.

Erin Mariano:

We also kept those obviously up to standard, but we kept them quite simple as well. So very simple language, easy to follow, easy to read. And, of course, we tried with the trainers themselves. It's not obviously a reading out the book scenario. They were taught a number of facilitation techniques in the up-skilling phase of the project to help the learners.

Michelle Ockers:

So what skills most needed to be developed with the trainers?

Erin Mariano:

So as a whole, the trainers were generally drivers that were excellent drivers, and then were moved into training as is the norm. So they were wonderful drivers and had developed some

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training skills. But essentially, they just needed a bit of confidence when it came to facilitation. And especially because we had developed this program that was so different from what they were used to, different strategies, we really needed to up-skill them to be able to implement this program so that it would be successful. So just general facilitation techniques. Things like how to run activities, and how to question so that you aren't always talking. How to conduct group discussions, and how to use different tools, how to use the resources. Obviously, the games. How to best use the character of Siphophile in the storytelling. So it was mostly just around facilitation, and getting the most out of the drivers because they had such a rich knowledge. It doesn't always, or it actually shouldn't ever be knowledge coming from one side of the room. So to really get them to encourage the drivers to talk and to share, those types of skills were important.

Michelle Ockers:

It feels like the whole approach was very respectful of everyone involved. The drivers and the trainers as well, and making the most of the knowledge and using approaches that were really well suited to this particular audience. If we flip the way we're looking at the solution, so you've described some of the key elements of the solution. And you've talked about the idea of approaching it as a learning journey rather than a program. Can you walk us through what that learning experience look like from the perspective of somebody coming on to the program, from the time that they're nominated for the program or enrolled in the program right through to completing and getting accreditation, or any follow-on support? What does that look like, that learner experience?

Erin Mariano:

So in starting the program, I mean it has changed ever so slightly in the sense that there are digitalizing some of the content now. It's not all face to face, obviously because of keeping things current and the way the workplace is at the moment. But it is an experience in the sense that they are always part of the learning. So it's never a case of them sitting there and receiving information in every single part of the journey. So when they start from, for example, the first part is looking at who is the company? Where do they fit in? How do they grow within the company? It's all about them. And all of the activities, all of the assessments and everything is focused on them.

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Erin Mariano:

I really like to make people uncomfortable in the sense that whether it's a face-to-face learning experience, or whether it's virtual, I don't know if anyone can relate. But you get that pit in your stomach where you go, "She's not really going to make us do this or that. She's not really going to make us share this or whatever." And you get that uncomfortable pit. And then when you actually start doing it, you go, "Wow, this is really cool. This is really amazing. I didn't know I could share this." Or I didn't know X, Y, Z from somebody. So that was the idea for me, was to create a little bit of discomfort to get people out of their seats at the time. To get them involved.

Erin Mariano:

So all the time, there was a bit of content, then there was some kind of activity where they had to get up and they had to do something, whether it was play a specific game, or use a resource to do something or go outside and actually go and inspect a vehicle. Go and measure something, for example, which all sounds incredibly simple. But those were things that we found were great needs. So I really just wanted the target audience to really have this experience. Everything was doing. There was not too much where they were sitting just listening.

Michelle Ockers:

And that suits the nature of the ... it replicates the work context for a lot of people working in roles where you're not sitting at a desk, more physical roles. The idea of sitting in a classroom for a whole day, or even just sitting in front of a computer screen these days doing digital learning. It's very disengaging, and very difficult to concentrate if that's not the way you normally work if you're more active than that.

Erin Mariano:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So we did try replicate that. And I think it was successful in replicating the work environment and getting them to actually practically go and do things and experience things.

Michelle Ockers:

Are there any particular activities that were included in the program that you think we're really high impact? Anything that really made the program, held it together or that people responded to most strongly?

Erin Mariano:

I think, and maybe this is not fair. But something that was actually really impactful to me was just to go back to one of the challenges, was we realized that some of the drivers really struggled with depth perception. And not from a physical perspective like they couldn't see. But when you ask somebody, "How far is a meter?" They weren't really too sure how far that is. So I mean it was the most simple, again, one of the most simple strategies where as part of the facilitator toolkit, we included this five-meter-long piece of rope. And part of it, because one of the rules of the road was that you're not allowed to park within five meters of an intersection. But if you don't know how far five meters is, well, it's pretty hard to do that.

Erin Mariano:

And one of the simplest activities was take out this rope, and have a look at how long five meters really is. So very, very simple. But again, quite impactful. So although it wasn't an activity as such, it was just a really simple strategy to illustrate something. The client actually also included really simple resource. When you're transporting fuel, the movement of the fuel has a very big impact on the stability of the vehicle, which is also quite abstract concept to

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understand. So the client used a clear water bottle filled with coloured liquid, and just moving that bottle back and forth you're able to see the movement of the liquid. And you can then understand the physics of the vehicle, and how that might impact the way that you drive or the stability of your vehicle.

Erin Mariano:

And then other very simple ... I used to be a teacher, and my mum used to be a primary school teacher. And so she always used to play very simple games with us that she used to do with her learners. And that's impacted me. And sometimes we played the most simple games like matching different cards, and just getting people to match words with definitions. And things like that, that were really simple but got them out of their chairs and involved and talking. And having a bit of fun, but learning at the same time.

Michelle Ockers:

There's this theme running through the whole solution around simplicity, but powerful and impactful because of the simplicity as well, Erin, and not trying to over design the solution or make it fancy or more complex than it needed to be. I really like that about the work you've done here. Talk to me a little bit more about resources. You've mentioned resources a couple of times, and you've talked to us about couple of the training aids. Were there also what we would call typically performance support resources, things that people could take away and refer to in the workplace?

Erin Mariano:

So at the end of each module, we created these quick reference guides that essentially were sheets that just had some cleverly designed elements on them. That's highlighted the most important parts of a module, perhaps some rules or regulations or physical aspects. And because of the two-year refresher training, we didn't want to go develop a whole new program or for them to just use the same stuff. So the client uses the quick reference guides as the refresher training elements, which is also quite nice. And then we also developed smaller versions of the quick reference guides, and put them on key rings for the drivers so that they always had this reference point literally on their key ring with them at all times in the day. So again, pretty simple and straightforward, but something that they use all the time.

Michelle Ockers:

So can you give us an example of something that might have ended up in one of those small reference guides hanging off a key ring, that would have been useful?

Erin Mariano:

Yeah. So from the dangerous goods perspective, we included ... they use tables that show which chemicals cannot be transported with others as it's volatile or dangerous. So included elements like that. For modules that were related to hijacking, for example, if there was a specific procedure that they needed to follow, or if there was civil unrest or riots and there was a procedure that they had to follow, then we included that as well. And then the modules that were a bit more involved in things like customer service, or who they are within the organization. They were just small elements, just to remind them. Remind them of the impact, remind them of the values and the mission and the vision of the organization, and

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where they fit in.

Michelle Ockers:

So are you able to talk to us a little about the impact of the solution?

Erin Mariano:

We've stayed in contact with our client, and I've loved to hear how the rollout of this program has really worked. And one of probably the biggest impacts firstly has been the trainers actually, and how they have loved being part of this program and how they've loved training it. It was a lot of fun up-skilling them, but then to hear how they've grown and how well they've done in implementing the program has been really exciting. So I think that's been a great value add, and a good impact on that side. And then from the driver perspective, obviously the client can talk more to the telemetry stats and things like that. But the feedback we've received is that the drivers have also just loved the character.

Erin Mariano:

They've loved the story, and they've really become attached and taken this character on as a bit of a role model. And there has been behaviour change and behaviour improvement. But definitely a lot of excitement around wow, the company is doing this for me. Wow, I get to be part of this training program that's exciting and new. And I guess one of the aspects that is a testament to its quality is that even though it was developed in 2017, it's still being rolled out. And it's still being used today, even though it's starting to be digitalized and things like that. But the bones are still the same.

Michelle Ockers:

And any feedback around road safety impact or customer service impact, or anything like that? Do you have visibility that I don't know you're not in the client organization?

Erin Mariano:

Yeah, unfortunately I don't have any feedback on that.

Michelle Ockers:

But obviously, if it wasn't hitting the market it wouldn't still be in use this number of years later. It is one of the challenges, isn't it? When you're working as an external learning professional, and you go in and you do a piece of work. Sometimes you don't get to see the impact long term.

Erin Mariano:

Absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So I think for those of our listeners who are in that same situation as yourself, where they're working externally and they come in and do a piece of work. Any way that you can stay connected to the client and get feedback, and understand the impact so you can continue to refine your practice as well I think is useful to try to have that conversation. And

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set that up in the relationship if you can.

Erin Mariano:

Yeah, absolutely.

Michelle Ockers:

So what do you think, out of everything that went well and it sounds like lots of things went well? What do you look back on and think there were maybe two or three things that really went well, and why did they go well?

Erin Mariano:

I think probably one of the main things was the buy-in. And I think that was created right from the beginning. So from when we did the scoping, and we included a lot of stakeholders, everybody feels involved, everybody has a say. And everybody feels like they're part of the journey. The client also did an incredible job of change management on her side and buy-in. And just creating the hype and the excitement around this new journey that was happening, that was something exciting for the organization. So I think that was really, really important because without that, you're dead in the water. The second element is I think what we have mentioned throughout is just the simplicity. And not to take away that this might not work for everybody, but I think for the target audience, for the work environment, for what this project was. The simplicity of the strategies that were used just worked really, really well. Yeah, I think those are the two ones that stand out for me.

Michelle Ockers:

And you talked to us in terms of challenge about the language literacy and numeracy challenge, and the diversity of the target audience. Were there any other things that came up that you had to maybe adjust along the way in terms of your design approach or any issues when you started testing things where you had to rethink and do something differently?

Erin Mariano:

It was probably just the technicality of the content in some places that not being the technical expert. I worked with a team of fantastic technical experts that often corrected and helped me to make sure that it was technically correct, and ticked all of the boxes in that side of things. So I think that was probably a challenge for me, the technical side. But other than that, yeah those were the two biggest challenges. And then the timing aspect. But I don't know if that counts as a challenge in learning and development, because we all face the same thing.

Michelle Ockers:

It's just a constraint. It's part of how we have to work to do things in short timeframes. So what did you personally learn as a result of doing this project?

Erin Mariano:

So I think the key lessons were ask a lot of questions in those scoping sessions, whether it's finding out more about the target audience or finding out about what's really there. And what really works and what really doesn't. So I think asking probably the right questions, and a lot of them is great. I think speaking to a number of, or a diverse number of people in the organization always gives you a different perspective, which can only help you. And then I think I also just learned the importance of rolling up your sleeves and getting your hands dirty, and just being involved in becoming that target audience. Because again, it can really

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only assist you. And even if you have a few hours, I mean I didn't spend weeks learning about the truck drivers. It was really just a few hours, over a few days. And I'd really change the lens on how I put this project together.

Michelle Ockers:

So it sounds like that would be one of your biggest tips for others potentially, if you're working in as a learning designer. And you're going into an environment where you don't understand the context, where you don't know the audience where the technical domain is not something you're already familiar with. Really taking the time to get out into the work environment. What other tips do you have for learning designers who find themselves in that same situation, where what they're designing for is really unfamiliar to them?

Erin Mariano:

I think again, just ask as many questions and learn as much as you can. I think it's never waste of time. There's always the temptation to just get stuck in and just go with it. But I think that preparation is key, and could really either be a success or failure of the entire project. And that work up front is really important. So get a lot of diverse input, and don't be afraid to get your hands dirty.

Michelle Ockers:

It also sounded that test and iterate, and getting constant feedback as you were developing things was really important as well.

Erin Mariano:

Yeah, absolutely. As I said, our team was fantastic. And it wasn't a huge team. It was four, five people that we worked with just to make sure that we were constantly on the right track. Right at the end, we did do a full pilot of the entire learning journey. But before that, there were a lot of test phases that we went through. And that definitely helped.

Michelle Ockers:

Is there anything you haven't had a chance to share with us about the solution, or the experience of working on this project that you'd like to share?

Erin Mariano:

No, I don't think so. I don't know if I've spoken about it enough. But I think one of the successful elements was that we also didn't just go in there and say, "Okay, we need to develop a learning program for the drivers." We always like to take a step back and say, "Okay, let's look at the implementation. Let's look at the change." So we addressed the trainers and the facilitators, and the holistic aspect. It wasn't just here is a program, go do it yourself kind of scenario. We really looked at the whole thing. And I think that helped it become quite successful as well.

Michelle Ockers:

The implementation support is an important part of the whole rollout. Absolutely. Thank you so much, Erin, for sharing this story today. I think it's really practical, and there's lots of ideas to reflect on. And for learning professionals listening to this, I think that theme for me that really came out was that idea of simplicity. And really matching what you're doing to your target audience. Not necessarily doing things because you particularly like a technique, but really getting in the target audience's shoes and thinking about what's really going to work

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for this target audience, for this group of people.

Michelle Ockers:

So thank you so much for that, Erin. We are going to include a link to your LinkedIn profile in the resources that go with the episode if anyone would like to follow up, get in touch with you. And please pass on our thanks to your client, to Melanie also. I know she couldn't be with us today for the recording, unfortunately. But we appreciate that she was happy for you to share this story from Unitrans.

Erin Mariano:

Thanks, Michelle. I will definitely do that.

Michelle Ockers:

Fantastic. And I just want to check something I heard. Are you migrating to Australia? Was that you?

Erin Mariano:

I am indeed. Next week, in fact.

Michelle Ockers:

So we're recording this on the 27th of May. So in June, you'll be here in Australia.

Erin Mariano:

Absolutely. Yeah, I will be on your shores. And I'm really excited for our new adventure.

Michelle Ockers:

That's fantastic. You're going to be living in Melbourne, I believe.

Erin Mariano:

Yes, that's correct. Yeah, I will be relocating to Melbourne. So we'll spend a few weeks in one of your hotels, and then we will be on the ground ready to rock and roll.

Michelle Ockers:

So a big call out, anyone listening to this episode who is from Melbourne, please connect

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with Erin and welcome her to your city on LinkedIn. I'm sure she'd appreciate that.

Erin Mariano:

Thanks, Michelle. I definitely will.

Michelle Ockers:

Thanks so much, Erin.

Erin Mariano:

Thanks.

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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 experienced, pragmatic organisational learning strategist, L&D capability builder and modern workplace learning practitioner. She also delivers keynotes, workshops and webinars for learning and broader professional or workforce groups at both public and in-house events.

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

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



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