

Michelle Ockers:

Welcome listeners to another episode of Learning Uncut. In the spirit of reconciliation, I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connection to land, sea and culture. I pay respect to elders past, present and emerging. It's my absolute pleasure today to introduce someone I have only recently met at a couple of conferences. It felt like we were bumping into each other all over the place in June, Mehri Doyle, welcome to Learning Uncut.

Mehri Doyle:

Thank you so much, Michelle. It's a pleasure to be here with you.

Michelle Ockers:

It's lovely to have you here. I enjoyed your company tremendously at those two conferences. And I think obviously that the work that we're going to talk about today with social learning that you've done at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade is well worth sharing. I've always had a bit of a soft spot for social learning, and I think it is hard to find social and collaborative learning initiatives that have been done well. So I was very excited when you spoke about the work you've done at DFAT. Shall we get started?

Mehri Doyle:

Absolutely. Thank you so much.

Michelle Ockers:

So can you tell us a little bit about DFAT, particularly for our overseas listeners? I think the name gives it away as to what the role of the organisation is, but let's do a bit of an introduction to the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.

Mehri Doyle:

Awesome. So thank you so much, Michelle. I'm really eager to share what we've done in social learning at DFAT. So DFAT is Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, which looks after essentially all of our international engagement that we have between Australia and other countries. I am a director within our Diplomatic Academy, which was established in 2016 to build international engagement capabilities across our staffing, portfolio and other agencies who work to build international engagement with other countries around our global network of over 120 different embassies and high commissions around the world. So the work that the department does is quite broad. If you're an Australian and you're traveling overseas and you lose your passport, you might need to speak with someone in one of our missions to get a new passport. It may be that, you know, we do work around things like free trade agreements with different countries to make sure that we're maximizing business and trade opportunities. We build bilateral and multilateral engagement to advance Australia's interests across a whole suite of different areas. So it's a really interesting place to work because no two days are the same working at DFAT and the department is quite broad. And so working within our diplomatic academy, you know, it does lend itself to a really interesting curriculum. We'd be building learning that encompasses everything from one of those areas. And our focus really is on delivering courses that build good basis of skills, knowledge, and attributes for modern diplomacy. So we try and leverage the real world experience of our staff who come from all over the world and represent quite a diverse group of people, including other government agencies. So anyone who works at departments like the department of defence or home affairs or agriculture, or

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any of those kinds of industries that really engage more broadly beyond our borders, we target with quality, or what I hope is quality, and innovative learning experiences.

Michelle Ockers:

And tell me a little bit more about your team, Mehri.

Mehri Doyle:

Sure, so I'm very lucky to work with an amazing team of people, which I happen to completely biasly believe is the best learning and development team in the country. So my team is actually spread around the world a little bit as well. So I have a few learning advisors who work in my team across Europe and then also in Canberra. So primarily our staffing base is in Canberra in Australia. We also have a learning experience designer who is amazing at building multimedia, social learning products and different types of digital media. We also manage the communications for our diplomatic academy in my team. So how we communicate our courses and build resources that can help, you know, really showcase the work that we do in a strategic way and also leverage things like a studio that we've built in our Diplomatic Academy in Canberra, you know, to really create high level products that really deliver quality videos, quality podcasts, like we're on today and so on. So that's kind of what my team look after is creating all of that learning design and communicating that.

Michelle Ockers:

So it sounds like there is a lot of digital design and media skills in the team as well, Mehri. Imagine having your own studio. That's great.

Mehri Doyle:

Yeah, look, it is amazing. We're very, very lucky. We first started actually just producing videos ourselves and occasionally just obtaining video products from providers. But the more that we delivered, the more we thought, okay, we need to build our in-house capabilities in this space and secure a learning experience designer. Now we've been fortunate enough to, our new comms manager who I'm very excited has just joined our team actually comes from a digital agency and has built lots of videos and is like a senior videographer from a digital background. So I can't wait to see what we're able to create in the coming years with his skillset as well. So it's a really good place to be.

Michelle Ockers:

And that international context, it's clear that that lends itself to digital and online learning methods. So that's good to get a feel for that. We're going to talk about what's called a SPOC. Not everybody's going to be familiar with what a SPOC is. Do you want to introduce us to what that term means and how it differs from other online learning formats?

Mehri Doyle:

No problem. So we characterize a SPOC as a small private online course. It essentially uses a MOOC platform, which is a massive open online course that are typically used by large organizations or universities as a mechanism for engaging, you know, a global group of diverse learners on one platform. So essentially a SPOC is just a private version of a MOOC. So you can actually ring fence the audience that you want to access that learning. So for us, it's anybody who has a .gov.au email address can actually complete and enrol into our SPOCS. It's essentially an online, small private program that allows a group of learners who are geographically dispersed to access a platform from any device. So it could be their mobile phone or an iPad or a laptop or a PC, basically anything that connects to the internet. It's accessible from anywhere. Super easy to just log into a website and start completing your learning. So you can watch a video on your phone or read a blog article. I often do it while I'm waiting for the water to boil while I'm making spaghetti for my kids or, you know,

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you're in the, you're transiting to work. And so you might be on the bus or on the train or something like that, but it basically simulates social learning. So you would access it just as you would a YouTube. Like YouTube platform or Facebook or something like that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And because you have learners all around the globe, does that mean everything is asynchronous or do you actually run live online sessions as part of your SPOCs?

Mehri Doyle:

Yeah. So we don't actually run live online sessions just because it's a bit hard for us with everyone in different time zones. So everything is just on there and you can access it any time or day that suits you. What we do have though, is a bunch of educators. So whenever we're delivering a spot for a period of time, we actually have one starting today. So for the next four weeks, we'll actually have educators online at various times of day, responding to comments in a live session. They're not actually, it might be that you're online at the same time and you're responding and having a live moderated conversation, but there isn't like a face-to-face or face-to-screen session that accompanies it. It's all just over messaging really.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, but really strong emphasis on social connection, right. As part of the delivery method.

Mehri Doyle:

Absolutely. One of the things that I think really sets this mode of learning apart is that we're trying to simulate people having a conversation with someone at a barbecue, but online. So the voice that we use when we're engaging with our learners is very much like we're talking to a person as opposed to writing for an online audience where it's quite static or serious or, you know, not in a conversational tone. We wanted to try and simulate that, you know, having a chat with someone over a barbecue and you would be talking to them about the subject matter as though you were talking to a friend. The learning itself is in short bursts as well, so that it's easily digestible for people. And so that you can do it in like 10 minutes or less in little chunks. In terms of the content, I mentioned that we have one launching today. So over the next four weeks, learners will actually undertake about 15 to 25, 10 minute bursts each week. You know, they can choose when they want to engage and log on and do that bite-sized learning. It might be watching a video, reading an article, engaging in a little online activity or working as part of a group in response to a question or a case study. But over the next four weeks, they essentially do a whole bunch of little bursts of learning while people have a chat with them about how they're finding that. And there's various prompts in there for people to engage.

Michelle Ockers:

It's interesting, the conversational tone that you're going for here, because it's quite a serious topic, the SPOC we're going to talk about, right? It's about understanding Australia's foreign policy. So let's talk about the topic. What was the need that drove the topic? What were you trying to achieve for the organisation with this topic? And, you know, just kind of the key outcomes you were looking for. So a bit of context around the topic.

Mehri Doyle:

No problem. So as with many things that happens at DFAT, our executive director had visited the UK, our British counterparts, and had seen that they were leveraging this Future Learn platform to develop some foundation level learning and essentially came back and said, hey, that sounds like a really good idea. Let's explore it further, I want one too. So we essentially had a look at, our courseware initially starts with foundation level, where we're trying to inform and help guide anybody who has an interest in knowing something about

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Australia's foreign policy to basically have some kind of foundation level knowledge, skills and attributes and understanding of what that really means in practice in their roles. So you could be working at DFAT, and working in the foreign policy landscape through an L&D role like I am, working in a diplomatic academy, which would otherwise be considered just like a corporate enabling space. But I still have a role to play in foreign policy and the work that the department does, just like someone would if they were actually in that instance that I mentioned earlier, where, you know, you may travel, let's say, to France, let's just pretend that we're having the Euro Summer that everyone else is.

Michelle Ockers:

Good timing. We're recording just before the Olympics starts.

Mehri Doyle:

Yeah. So let's say you go to the Olympics in Paris right now, and unfortunately you lose your passport on a bus going into one of the games. So you would likely contact our mission over there, our embassy and get a replacement for your passport. And that person who would likely provide that to you would be one of our locally engaged staff who may be a French person working in the Australian mission and whose role is to provide passports to Australians who obviously lose them or need them or apply for them. They're actually a French person who may be engaged by our mission over there and they're still working in Australian foreign policy. So there's a lot of different learning personas which form our target audience. And every one of us needs to learn something about how we actually see our role in advancing Australia's interests how we help Australians with what they need when it comes to international engagement. So really we needed a program that was able to provide thousands of people with that base level knowledge and skill. It was previously a two-day course that we used to run in Canberra that we created when we first set up the academy. and didn't have as much digital infrastructure. Our ability to obviously train people face-to-face was limited to, you know, the 20, 25 people who we could put into the room a few times a year and train them. What we found that as the Academy gained a bit more of a brand across the public service and, you know, as DFAT grew its operations and how we wanted to target our forces to be able to train people like our officers working in Paris or anywhere else in the world. We needed to come up with some kind of digital solution for this because those people who work in all of our embassies and high commissions around the world, of which there's over 120 of them, can't come back to Canberra to do a two day course. Obviously there needed to be something, something needed to change so that we could obviously access those people. When we looked at, you know, the likely courses that would be a good candidate to be converted into a MOOC. That two day course was the primary one that we said, yep, that would be amazing if we could turn that into an online course. And so we basically went from training about 50 people a year to being able to train. Like now I think there's over 2000 staff who've completed this spot and there's another 298 who start today.

Michelle Ockers:

So it's like 10 X in the number of people that you can take in a cohort here, right?

Mehri Doyle:

Absolutely. So, I mean, I've always found that. What I love the most about learning and development is that it can be a multiplier effect that I can have a team of five people, but our ability to impact thousands of people each year is there. And it just feels like such a, I don't know why anyone would want to work somewhere else. Obviously everyone has, everyone has their own cup of tea, but I really love what we do because I feel as though there are very few places where you can have as big a strategic impact as that. And that's just one of our programs, one of our stocks. We now have a fundamentals of international development.

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We now have this working as a multilateral diplomat. We actually have like foundation level mix in various topic areas of the department's operation. So we're very lucky.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, well, in terms of design considerations, you know, I think you've kind of laid out some of the context that makes it fairly clear why this was an obvious choice in terms of geographic spread in terms of scale. What about the considerations that drive you to approach this from the lens of social learning and connecting people? Because you could quite easily have just done a whole stack of e-learning modules and put them out there and be done with it. So why this kind of more connectivist social learning approach?

Mehri Doyle:

So there are two reasons why we actually picked this method of delivery to focus on social learning and then also having a platform that allowed us to respond to the changing geopolitical landscape. So every morning when you wake up, you know, you check the news and you see what's happened in the world. And so we really wanted a platform that would meet us where we needed to be in terms of flexibility and being able to create the learning on the fly or, you know, build the plane as we're flying it, as we say internally, where we're able to create content that's really fresh and current. So our intention is to be able to have content that's up there for learners that is really fresh, that is representative of what is occurring in the geographical landscape at any given time. So, you know, there's a whole bunch of things that will happen in the world on any given moment. We've just had, I've seen overnight that Biden has you know, stepped aside, for example, in the U.S. election. So being able to reflect things as they emerge in our course is very important so that our learners feel that we have our finger on the pulse and that we're able to discuss things as they happen. Another thing that we wanted to do in terms of a design consideration is really to tell compelling stories. So the platform Peer2Learn really allows us to be able to gain people's attention through an interface that's really clean and fresh and that we're able to tell stories in a variety of different ways. So we do use a lot of video in order to enable storytelling and sharing case studies, whether that's videos recorded in our studio or video shot on location, coupled with things like Padlets. So Padlets are, essentially we use them through things like a world map where people can plot themselves on a world map or different kinds of interactive online elements that allow people to engage with content in slightly different ways. We write a lot of articles and have things called rabbit holes, where if people want to dig deeper into various topics, they can actually access additional learning through other resources that we point them to. And if they want to, they can go down another rabbit hole if something really interests them. So really it's kind of trying to help people choose your own adventure and crafting design elements into your online learning that enable that, and that also get people to share their own stories. So I want to hear from those people who were working as LE in Paris, if we take that example, and we really want them to be able to share what is it like being, you know, a locally engaged staff working in Paris during the Olympics. I don't know what that's like, because I've never done that, but the more that I know about their experience and the way that they see themselves in foreign policy, the better learning I can create for all the other people like them, And everyone else can actually learn from hearing their stories as well, because it may be that at some point in four years time, that'll be a whole different team of people in a different country dealing with the same kinds of things. So that's something that we never had when we had the 25 people in a room in Canberra, because we never really would get the opportunity to hear from a locally engaged staff in the same way, because they simply wouldn't have been in that room. So, that's one of the more compelling things about delivering and using digital designers that you can actually have a wider diversity of views and thoughts in the room, the proverbial room.

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Michelle Ockers:

It sounds a lot more inclusive. I like some of the language you use then. I like the idea of calling kind of what we might call advanced learning or more additional resources, calling it rabbit holes, which kind of fits with that conversational tone you're going for. So it's really nice to hear that coming through. It's clear that you put a lot of effort into keeping it fresh, and that's based on a combination of current events, things that are going on in the world right now, and tapping into those, and also who's in the room, that virtual room, and what can you elicit from the group itself. What then stays constant from a design perspective? What is unchanging or enduring? versus the stuff which you're looking to refresh, update, which is maybe even going to be a little bit surprising or unexpected based on the cohort.

Mehri Doyle:

Yeah, sure. So initially when we first created that two day program in person, it was created around some key instructional design elements with some retired ambassadors who we got into a room, did some focus groups with, and essentially created a structure for a course that covers key elements of the department's work across foreign policy. I won't go into too much about the specifics of what that entails. A lot of what those ambassadors told us through the focus groups, and we also had one that we ran internally as well with leaders in the department, And we do that often, normally about once a year, just to make sure that our broad topics are still current and conscious of what the department's framework requires us to teach people. What changes in terms of each delivery of the SPOC is things like case studies. What we'll do is we have that baseline level of content that doesn't really change, but what will change are some of the stories that we'll tell around that. And what will change is some of the case studies as they emerge. So, you know, as different thematic areas come into more prominence in the department's work, we would then obviously respond with relevant content. So for example, as you mentioned earlier, the Olympics are on in Paris. There's a team of people who are working on the Olympics. It'd be really great for us to obviously think, hey, it would be really good to capture that knowledge for the next time that we're sending a team out to help support like an admission with a response to an international sporting event. So, you know, DFAT no doubt would have sent additional people to Paris to help our French team deliver what is required for the Olympics. So we often think of things like that as an opportunity to quickly capture the learning that those people have, and then pop it into a case study so that the next time something is running somewhere else, it might be the soccer world cup or whatever, we can use that to train people down the bit down the track. So what won't change is that we obviously assemble a team of people that go out and help people. And these are the skills that they need to learn. What does change is the subject matter. So it might be a sporting event as opposed to a global conference, or it might be, you know, some kind of last year I went to the international forum diplomatic academy. So it could be like a learning or thematic conference. So it just changes in terms of the subject matter, but the skills that are core to the tradecraft that offices are actually using doesn't change.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, that absolutely makes sense. You must have an incredible content library to draw on now as a result of this.

Mehri Doyle:

Yeah, look, we do. There's a lot of content that actually has been created over the past few years across all of our stocks, really. DFAT is a very rich place to work in terms of the subject matter and how interesting it is and how varied a lot of the areas are. And as much as we have created, there's still like, there's always half a dozen places on my list at DFAT where I'm like, oh, it'd be really good to do a case study on X or Y. So it's a never ending list really. Yeah, it's a really it's really nice to work somewhere where there's so many

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fascinating areas. If you're a bit of an international policy nerd like I am and you know, you just want to actually learn about those areas.

Michelle Ockers:

So it's a really interesting way of keeping things up to date when you're working in an organization which truly has, you know, ongoing change and shifts in the environment that everybody needs to stay abreast of. It's a very flexible approach. Let's talk about the educators. You've used the word educators, but they're not, well, it's interesting. Why did you call them educators and not something else? And what is their role? Because it's sort of almost sounds like too formal a title for the nature of the program and this conversational space you're trying to create.

Mehri Doyle:

So funnily enough, we didn't come up with the term ourselves. The Future Learn platform calls them educators. So we just rolled with it and use their terminology because in the system, that's what it characterizes them as. So I wish I could take responsibility for that, but that's on Future Learn. So essentially for us, our lead educators are a group of senior practitioners who operate in the foreign policy space, who can help us to draft and write content in a compelling voice, who can work with subject matter areas across our department. The people who were in the line area who are actually doing those roles on a day-to-day basis, they'll work with them to craft and create content that represents their work. And then they'll turn that into something that is written or scripted for an online audience. It may be that they also then pull out their tripod from JBHiFi and their mobile phone and their headphones, and they go record and develop content for us as well, and that they participate in the online forums by engaging with our learners, by having conversations and chats with them on the Future Learn platform to respond to their questions. So basically they're essentially an online facilitator could be another word used to describe what they do, but also a content creator, you know, dare I say, influencer, a foreign policy influencer. I hadn't really thought of that term before our call today, but yeah, so, I mean, we can't necessarily rely on people who are in those busy day jobs to actually then stop what they're doing and be an educator for our MOOCs. So that's why we came to rely on people who had worked in the department recently, who now may be either retired or taking a career break or something like that and have the capacity to engage with us, to share with us their experience and their thrills. So we assembled essentially a panel called Friends of the Academy, who are those officers who have stories to tell and who have skills to be able to share them.

Michelle Ockers:

It's such a great way of tapping into experience and getting people who really know it on the ground involved. I love that approach. And what did they get out of it? Tell me a little bit from their perspective, what you understand from their perspective, what motivates them to be part of it and how do they engage with the role?

Mehri Doyle:

Yeah, sure. So in terms of what I think they get out of it, you know, typically these are people who have spent decades working in this space. And in terms of going cold turkey from leaving DFAT, they get a chance to still engage with the department, they get a chance to share their knowledge and expertise with other officers who are obviously more junior than them and who want to learn from them because they are experienced people. A couple of the educators who we have on the course that starts today, all three of them actually have been ambassadors multiple times and who people in the department would have heard stories of. And they've done incredible work over the last 20, 30 years working at DFAT and you would have heard of them. You work in the department and heard some of the stories of

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what they've been able to achieve. So being able to have an audience with somebody or chatting over something that's of interest, you know, is a really unique thing. In the course of the work of the department, you may not get that opportunity to have effectively an online coffee with someone of that level of seniority and experience in your ordinary day-to-day work. I think what they get out of it is really, they're very passionate people who want to share what they've learned with other people. So being able to share their stories as to how they've been able to achieve what they have, what lessons they've learned and how sometimes, you know, maybe that they've stuffed something up and they've learned from that experience and they want to share that story so that others can learn from them. All of those stories are very important for us to be able to tell. In a psychologically safe environment where people are able to actually share that things don't always go the way that you want them to, but what did you learn from that? And how are you going to calibrate what you do next time? Or how can you learn from others around you in order to hopefully not do the same thing? So, you know, the world doesn't always have happy stories, but sometimes it has cautionary ones as well. And so if you're able to learn from others, I mean, that is essentially social learning where you're able to learn from others experiences. and be receptive to the stories that you hear and take something away from them.

Michelle Ockers:

It's a fantastic way to tap into that body of experience. How does your team work with them? Is it you know, is there a consistent way you work with them? Does it depend on, you know, the personality and experience of the individual educator that you're working with?

Mehri Doyle:

Essentially a project team. So each time we're about to deliver one of our courses, we'll assemble a project team. So typically it's from my team, it's myself and at least one of the senior learning advisors and our learning experience guy, Marcus is awesome. Essentially we'll assemble a project team with our curriculum manager, who ensures that we have our finger on the pulse with regards to things that are emerging in the department and areas of priority for us to focus on and they help guide the content and those lead educators. So essentially we'll provide, like we'll form a project team that meets once a week and we talk through, you know, what we each think needs to be updated in time for the following delivery. Someone will be assigned the role of a project manager. And so they'll keep us on track with making sure that we assign timelines to creating that content, getting it up into basically a level of drafting the line area of the department that we gave the necessary internal approvals on that content and then upload it into future. Obviously in a timely manner so that it's fresh for the course. So it's essentially run like any other project would be. And so they're just part of the project team, even though they're not in the department is like a permanent officer anymore. It's essentially contracting them in to deliver that project. So we'll do that through weekly team meetings, because typically they're based around the world or the country. So for our very first SPOC, we actually weren't in the same room at once ever for the first delivery of this program. And then we actually all came together when it ended, when people had flown into Canberra by chance and had a really lovely dinner at the end of it. So that was really nice. But because we're operating with a bunch of people who are around the world, typically just scheduling meetings that are on teams that are in a time zone that's happy for people. And then we also have a WhatsApp group. So the WhatsApp group allows us to have, you know, a much more casual way of being able to quickly engage on various topics. So it might be, can you jump in and respond to some of the comments in 3.1? You might ask someone where is the video that you promised you'd send through yesterday? So it allows for some of that more casual conversation that you'd have around the course design and construction.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. Let's talk a little bit about the participant experience and the kinds of interactions, engagement and contributions you see from them and how that's encouraged and nurtured.

Mehri Doyle:

Sure, so we ask our participants to allow for at least one day's worth of engagement each week. So approximately six hours a week in what could be as short as 10 minute bursts. They will contribute by going through the content that is uploaded onto Future Learn and typically responding to online conversations or requests for information through things like Padlets or group activities. So they'll make comments, they'll engage with other participants by simulating other social platforms where you can add someone and then have a conversation, start a conversation with them. So @Michelle Ockers, if I wanted to have a chat with you directly about something that's in the course content. There is a space on Future Learn that enables group activities. So we would put content in there and direct them to reading something and then responding as a group to certain things. In previous iterations, we've also played with them creating content and sending that into us through a central mailbox. There are a variety of different ways that you can look to engage people online. The main thing is trying to make it not too hard for them to engage and making it reasonably simple. In terms of being able to contribute their views or their opinions or to reflect on what it is and what that means for them in whatever country they're in and whatever role they're in and then share that back with us. So it might be that we want them to go away, have a think about something and then come back to us with some information as to how their post or their country does that thing. So in doing so, it really helps them to try and embed the work that they're learning about in their day jobs and then come back and tell us how you do that. And if they do that really well, we normally get them to create content with us for future iterations of the spot as well. So if we find someone who's particularly talented with the video, watch out.

Michelle Ockers:

And with any of these platforms, right, typically we see a wide range of levels of participation. Some people are very active. Other people don't engage a lot. How would you describe kind of the range of types of participant levels of activity and engagement that you see?

Mehri Doyle:

So you're a hundred percent right to think that there will be people who don't contribute that much, but that doesn't mean that they're not necessarily learning online. If you think about a classroom and you had like 20 people in the classroom, there's always two or three people who are going to try and answer every question. And then there'll always be probably 10 who are sitting there and just politely smiling and engaging in the content or talking to their neighbor when you direct them to or participating in group activity, but they won't necessarily put their hand up or answer questions in the broader group space. So we kind of think that the MOOC or SPOC is similar in that there will be a big chunk of people who may not actually verbalize their thoughts or in written format or otherwise in the SPOC. But that doesn't necessarily mean that they're not learning. The thing with the SPOC is that you can tell how much they're consuming, at the end of each page, there's like a little tick box that the system actually characterizes that they have actually completed that content. So you can still tell that they're completing and consuming the content, even if they haven't answered or engaged in the conversation. So from that perspective, we're able to still discern that they may be actively going through the content. But maybe they don't want to share their thoughts on something, and that's OK.

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Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So thinking about evaluation with a continuous improvement lens and looking for, you know, how do we just keep getting better at this? How do you go about evaluating the, you know, the effectiveness and outcomes from the SPOC and then looking at making improvements?

Mehri Doyle:

Yeah, sure. As you would well know, evaluating is one of the hardest parts of learning and development. and really being able to discern that there was value obtained from your course, as opposed to a hundred other things that someone might be doing. So in terms of our evaluation, we do run your typical evaluations in, you know, how did you find this program? How did you build your confidence? We do run focus groups to be able to discern after a period of time, how much was retained and applied to their roles. One of the things that is the most valuable for us is really that global reach. Anecdotally, we know that this program is delivering better outcomes for us than the face-to-face course because we're able to tap into that locally engaged voice and we're able to have a mechanism for engaging at scale, which we purely didn't have before. So that for us is one marker of evaluation that this program is delivering what the department needs. Anecdotally, we hear in discourse and conversation that that's really important to people, that it brings in a diversity of voice and perspective that we just didn't have before. And, you know, obviously equity in that we thousands more people are learning that wouldn't have had the opportunity to learn. So while that isn't necessarily corresponding to specific evaluation metrics, it does for us in terms of the data, the scale and the ability to bring in that diversity of voice and perspective. So for us, they're really two very important things. We know that we're able to meet what the department requires in terms of that scale and also extending it to other agencies, which is not as easy to do when you're limited to, you know, proverbial bums on a seat. So being able to reach people from other agencies at scale is also really powerful because the more that other agencies who work with us as collaborative partners know about the work that we do and how their work is critical to that, the better.

Michelle Ockers:

Absolutely. Tell me a little bit more about the focus groups. How do you run those and what are some of the insights you've gained through focus groups?

Mehri Doyle:

Thank you. So yeah, so focus groups for us are a way of us to be able to get quantitative and qualitative analysis done around if our content is actually meeting the mark. We'll use them in a variety of ways. It might be before we actually run one of our SPOCs, almost as like a little needs analysis, just to collaborate with a group of people who've undertaken the course or senior leaders from within DFAT that we're targeting the upcoming content in areas that are of thematic importance to them. So typically it's run over teams or face to face in Canberra to about 10 to 12 people in a room where we're able to ask them, you know, typically four or five questions and really get some rich discussion happening to be able to get insights on. What are some upcoming important topics that you want us to cover? You know, which aspects of the learning were most enjoyable and memorable for you so that we could try and preserve those elements? Were there any aspects that were things that you could live without that you think didn't quite hit the mark? We can typically correlate that with the data that we receive from the actual platform itself and see, okay, well, people didn't really complete that step as much as the average would be. So maybe it didn't quite land effectively. So there'll be a combination of data analytics that we'll have and the anecdotal feedback that we'll have, and we'll put them together to make sure that each time we're looking at the content to see if it does hit the mark. We're able to use those key data points

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in order to make those decisions about what comes in, what stays out, what do we need to build to refresh.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, thank you for that. That's particularly useful. So how long since you launched SPOC? What, three, four years or not quite that long?

Mehri Doyle:

So we've been running it for three years now, three years for our Australian Corridor Policy one and then our Fundamentals of International Development we launched last year. And I think the year in between we did the working as a multilateral diplomat.

Michelle Ockers:

So what are some of the key lessons that you and the team have learned along the way about running a SPOC?

Mehri Doyle:

There would be so many and they change all the time. But my main one upon reflecting for our recent conferences that we attended together was to think of it as being alive. So it's something that is a living body of work that people contribute to. Hundreds and hundreds of people contribute to it. So thinking of it as not a static program that's sitting on a shelf, but treating this course as though it's alive or like sourdough starter or something that is just bubbling away there that you could contribute to or turn it into something. So thinking of it as something that is growing and moving based does enable people working on the project to also consider themselves in that. So people approach it from the project team with the means of constantly improving it because there is that energy around, is this still delivering what it needs to? And it may be that it is, or that you need to recast it or reshape it and edit it into something else. Or maybe you retire that piece of content because it's not as topical and you create something new. And that's not to say that you don't still have that content in your library for, you know, in a year's time, it might be relevant again. So you know that you have it and you can draw upon that again. So thinking of it as though it is alive allows you to constantly approach it with the degree of flexibility and that you're there to deliver whatever outcomes the department needs at that time. So you draw from that content library and add in things that are really topical. And over a period of time, you have more to draw upon because you've created more pieces of content with more people. And also, I think you're thinking about the opportunities that you would have to respond to things that occur. So for example, in a few weeks time, Louise, one of our lead educators is going to be on a national geographic ship in the Arctic. So that doesn't happen every day. Pretty awesome. So we're like, okay, well, let's try and think of something that she could deliver, maximize that opportunity. And if you think of, you know, the sum of the department of DFAT size, which is around six and a half thousand people. There's a lot of really interesting opportunities that people are undertaking around our world every day. So if you're able to try and find those opportunities where someone has the capacity to create content, that could be something you could draw upon, you know, it does help to feed this awesome beast that is our Spock. That is something that is living and breathing beyond us. I think it really does give rise to people bringing their best to the program and really contributing their personality. Some of our educators like to call it their X factor. So it does allow for people to bring their X factor to work, which we like.

Michelle Ockers:

Fabulous. I love the analogy of it as being like a sourdough starter. It's a really great way of putting it. Do you use that analogy a lot?

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Mehri Doyle:

I just actually thought of it this morning because I saw a video on Instagram of someone who had opened their little pot of sourdough and it was all bubbling and alive because they nudged it. And I thought, oh, that actually feels like our program.

Michelle Ockers:

It works really well. So if anyone is listening in learning and development professionals and like me, they're really excited by what you've talked about today and thinking that, you know, they'd love to give it a go, creating a SPOC, running a SPOC in their organization. What tips would you give them for how to get started to do this well?

Mehri Doyle:

So I would say have a look at the various platforms that are available. So Future Learn is just one of them, but there are a few out there like Coursera and others, you know, that could be applicable to your needs. So have a clear sense of who you're trying to deliver this learning to and what their needs are, and then have a look at a bunch of platforms, get demos of them so that you can see if there's one in particular that delivers against those functional requirements you have for your target audience. We created learning personas for each of our key groups at DFAT and other agencies. So, you know, really knowing from their perspective what they would want to get out of it is critical, as would be the case for any program that gets developed. It doesn't matter if it's a SPOC or any other kinds of learning you're doing. Having a clear sense of your audience is really important. And then just try and dive in. The provider will help you with storyboarding initially, and you can lean on them for support in terms of how to utilize their platform. But happy for you to reach out to me as well, if you want any help or need any ideas or just want to have a chat. I'm sure my LinkedIn details will be available as part of this.

Michelle Ockers:

They'll be in the show notes, absolutely Mehri. And you've been doing a lot of sharing through your speaking. So thank you for your generosity in doing that and for being our guest today. Really appreciate you sharing your work and insights with us today, Mary.

Mehri Doyle:

My pleasure, Michelle. Thank you so much for asking. I'm chuffed to have a chat with you and meet you after so many years of seeing for the excellent work that you do. Thank you.

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

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About your host, Michelle Ockers



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

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

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



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