

**Michelle Ockers:**

Welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut, listeners. I'd like to commence in the spirit of reconciliation by acknowledging traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and culture, and to pay respect to elders past, present and emerging. And I would like to welcome Thomas J. Tobin to Learning Uncut. Welcome, Tom.

**Thomas J. Tobin:**

Thank you very much, Michelle. It's a pleasure to be here with you and your listeners.

**Michelle Ockers:**

And look, a lot of the Australian ones will be familiar with you. Some of them from the recent Australian tour that you did, including the Australian Institute of Training and Development Conference, where you were a fabulous keynote speaker. You spoke at a number of other places while you were down in Australia mid 2024, didn't you, Tom? Do you want to tell us a little about those?

**Thomas J. Tobin:**

Absolutely. It was an honor for me to get to work with folks in industry, in higher education, and in further education and training as well. I ended up working with colleagues in Melbourne, in Sydney, and in Perth, and in Adelaide. Across the way, worked with folks in TAFE, the Training for Australian Further Education sector, and worked at a conference for disability service providers across higher education, and of course, that Australian Institute for Training and Development keynote where you and I met. That was a whirlwind. That was, I think, six different spots in seven different days, and then I was back on a plane to the United States. So I'm looking forward to perhaps coming back and spending some more time.

**Michelle Ockers:**

There's so many places you could visit, so much beauty in this country of ours. Tom, I know you spoke about a really mixed range of audiences and groups that you spoke to on the topic we're going to talk about today, which you have a very deep area of expertise and passion for universal design for learning. It is generally applicable in a wide range of sectors and contexts. But of course, your formal role, your official role is embedded in supporting universities and colleges. So can we start there? And we'll anchor some of the conversation and examples of the work you do supporting universities and colleges, but also look at because I know you do speak and consult to a broad range of sectors, how this might be applicable to the different environments in which our listeners work. So let's start with an introduction to your role supporting universities and colleges. Tom?

**Thomas J. Tobin:**

Sure. I am one of the founding members of the Center for Teaching, Learning and Mentoring at the University of Wisconsin-Madison in the United States. We've had our Teaching and Learning Center only for a few years. And my speaking and consulting work, that's been for almost 15 years now. And since I lived in Chicago, now I live in Pennsylvania. that's been the through line of my career. So I've been advocating for the educational rights of people with disabilities or other access barriers that are in their way. And along the way, I've worked with colleagues in industry and academia because learning takes place in the workplace just as much as it does in higher education and in further education, community college, and those kinds of spaces. And that's been really the impetus for my whole career is helping

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lower those barriers because we have the technology that affords those kinds of things for us today.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Was there a particular moment or experience that sparked your interest in advocating for better access to education, educational rights of people, particularly I know you were very passionate about the educational rights of people with disabilities and from disadvantaged backgrounds. Where did that interest come from, Tom?

### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

His name is Marty. And I was on a track to become an English professor. In fact, my PhD is in 19th century British art history and literature. And my doctoral dissertation is on an art movement. I think six people in the world have read it. While I was working on my doctorate, I got hired at a local community college, a two-year college, you'd call them further education or vocational ed in Australia. And this was 1996. They hired me based on the strength of my ability to code HTML and to help them put together their very first online courses. Listeners, you can't see this, but I have a whole bunch of gray hair and it's all earned. Back in the day, I helped this college to adopt Blackboard version one as their learning management system. Along the way, I was very proud of the work that we did. We had, after four years there, three full two-year degrees and 17 certificate programs, fully asynchronous and online, including heating, ventilating, and air conditioning, which people told me was impossible. But what really changed the focus and the direction of my career was Marty. Marty taught business courses for the college. He came to my office and he said, you know, I think this online stuff is baloney. And I also want to have a job in five years. So can you teach me how to do this? And as a 20 something early professional, I said, sure, I'll help you. And what I didn't recognize was Marty had gone blind in his 40s due to undiagnosed and so untreated diabetes. So I'll put air quotes here. He didn't, quote unquote, know how to be a blind person. He didn't get around with a cane. He didn't have a service animal. He couldn't read Braille. He didn't do any touch typing, any of those kinds of things that someone who had been blind for a long time might have learned. And I thought, okay, I'll help Marty, right? And immediately after he left my office, I went back to my computer and I said, oh, there's got to be literature on this. Someone will have advice for how to support a blind instructor. There wasn't any literature. Through good fortune, and friends of friends of friends, I got connected to Norm Coombs. He had been blind since birth. He was a faculty member at the Rochester Institute of Technology in New York. He was an advocate for the rights of people across the ability spectrum to take part in education. And when I talked to Norm, his advice was essentially good luck, kid, with a few specific things that we might try with Marty. One of those things succeeded very well. This is in the days before we had program that would read things out loud like JAWS. And what we did was we hired graduate students from a local university to be Marty's eyes and ears. He knew what a television screen looked like, so it wasn't a far leap for him to understand what a learning management system environment looked like and operated like. So the graduate students would log into Blackboard, they would read the posts on the discussion forums from Marty's students, or they would read the activities or assignments that the students did, and Marty would hear that, and he'd say, oh, respond this way, or make a mark here, or that's poorly done, or that's well done. And when Marty would grade things like this or give feedback like this, it worked perfectly well for three entire offerings of the course until I had a vice president standing in my office door saying that we had to shut Marty down. And I said, why? This is going so well. And his response was, do you realize how many US privacy laws we are violating by having these students get access to this educational record material? And we had to stop. That failure gave me the opportunity to start thinking, if this was this challenging to help just one person, who are the people out there whom we are serving poorly or maybe not at all? And I started to understand that there were lots of people who could be learners with us and instructors with

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us. but they just lived too far from campus. They had work responsibilities, caregiving and family responsibilities. They were engaged in military service. You name the reason why their times and availability were different than our campus, and they were out there. And that really made me move in the direction of trying to figure out, well, what are the biggest barriers that people have to learning? And when we talk about those barriers to learning, most people assume that the biggest one is disabilities. And if you think about folks in training, in industry, or people in academia today, that's the one that they see or experience most often, right? They have someone who comes in and has an accommodation for disability, or they want to lower a barrier in the environment, and they have paperwork for it. But the bigger population of folks who had barriers, their barrier wasn't the environment. It was the clock. It was time. So when we think about the pace and the evolution of universal design for learning, things kind of shifted in 2011 here in the United States. And it happened in Australia earlier in 2009. And those are the years in our respective countries when more people owned a smartphone than owned a laptop or a desktop computer. The mobile computing and mobile internet access wave made a lot of the barriers that we ordinarily would see and say, oh, there's nothing we can do. It made them surmountable. And that's been my whole career and my whole advocacy around universal design for learning.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

What a fabulous story. I love the way you shared that with us. And there's these two threads, right? There's people and there's technology right from the earliest part of your career. And the fact that we can do so much with the tech we've got and we've got the opportunity to be really thoughtful about how we design and enable with tech to reduce or to increase access, not just for people, as you say, with what we might call special needs or requiring accommodations, but for everyone. And time, which you mentioned there, is the biggest barrier. It still is. You look at all of the survey work that's done, all of the work I do on learning strategy with organizations, invariably time is cited as the biggest barrier. We're all too busy for this learning stuff, right? We've got to get the job done, or I've got caring responsibilities, or I've got kids that I've got to run around to sports, whatever it is. And one of the things that struck me at your conference session at the AITD conference was that you presented universal design for learning as relevant to designing learning for everyone, not just those with special needs. And if we can get our heads around it and take this broader perspective, we're going to improve access to learning and experience of learning for everyone in our organizations. Can you explain this broader perspective and why it's important?

### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

Yeah, absolutely. So you're hitting on something that's really important in any learning scenario. When I'm working with colleges and universities, they'll often hire me to work with them and say, you should teach our instructors how to be more inclusive and lower barriers in their classes. And my response is often, they're not the only ones. So if we're thinking about training in an organization, if we're thinking about teaching in a college or a university, the burden of doing inclusive work often falls only on the shoulders of the people doing the training or doing the facilitation or doing the teaching. But that's not the only place where people learn in our organizations. In a college or a university, our librarians are teaching students how to work with information. And the same thing is true of our organizational librarians as well, and information technology people. Our information technology sector is training or teaching people how to work productively with the tools that are provided to them in the workplace or in higher education. Our mental health counselors, our human resources folks, they're all teaching folks how to navigate the systems of our organizations. And that learning can benefit from the same kind of barrier lowering and broader access that universal design for learning is all about. So what is it? What's that broader perspective? When we learn anything, we have to activate three different chemical pathways in our brains. Now, Michelle, I'm not going to go into the acetylcholine uptake pathway through the

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hippocampus on this show. I can totally do it, but not for today. Those three different chemical pathways, they correspond to different networks of how our brain works. The first is affect. Do we pay attention to this at all? Are we engaged in it or do we ignore it? The second is a recognition network in our brains. Is this useful information? Is this information that relates to other things that we know about or we've learned? And then the third network is strategy. Can I actually use this? This is why some folks are really good at trivia contests and others are not, because they have that recognition and then they can put it to use. But the strategic network is also how do we practice with new information? How do we get better at it? How do we encode it into our overall understanding of a concept or a practice so that it becomes new knowledge hooked into our existing knowledge? Now, if that's even too esoteric, if we're talking about affect recognition and strategy, Let's talk about why, what, and how. So Michelle, here's a question for you. When was the last time that a major appliance broke in your house? What was it?

**Michelle Ockers:**

It was my washing machine.

**Thomas J. Tobin:**

Tough to live without that for a while, so you had a burning why. I need to be able to wash my clothes. And so having that really crystal clear, important, urgent reason to learn how to fix it or find somebody who can. That why, it's never that urgent in a training scenario at work. It's never that urgent in a class at a college or university. So how do we, as educators or trainers, get people to engage with us and then have them stick with us, especially when things get challenging or complex? And there's a lot of different ways that we can do that. But then you had that why, and then what was the what? How did you actually fix it? Or did you call in someone else? Did you find someone?

**Michelle Ockers:**

Well, I started by trying to troubleshoot, right.

**Thomas J. Tobin:**

Oh, fantastic.

**Michelle Ockers:**

Yeah, I went onto the internet to see if I could find a manual to work through, you know, what does this error code mean? Why might it not be starting up and so on? And I got to the limits of my ability to use that performance support material, if you like, that I'd gone and found. And then I started looking around for a repair person. I live in a regional area. There aren't a lot of them around. You know, I found that my nearest one was three hours drive away when I rang the manufacturer and I thought, well, I've got to do better than this. So I had to, you know, go and poke around on the Internet a little more. And I managed to find someone who lived 40 minutes away. You could service all kinds of different things. And I got them out.

**Thomas J. Tobin:**

Oh, splendid. So, what you'll notice, Michelle, that you used a lot of different methodologies. You used a lot of different formats. You went online and found the manual. So that required you to look at visual information, parts lists, error code lists, those kinds of things. And when you got to the end of your own abilities and expertise, then it was, can I find somebody who can help me with this? Is there somebody who knows what they're doing? And then, you know, back in the day, you listeners over a certain age will remember the white pages and the yellow pages, right? So we would go and find service providers. But these days, we just hop on our phones, or we ask Google or Siri, hey, where's there a repair person? And you do a little bit of sleuthing there. You had a lot of different options for how you could find that

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information as well. You could have looked up the manual by going to the manufacturer's website. You could have found the manual by doing a search, or you could have gone to your local library and asked your librarians for help there. There were lots of different avenues to you that were available. And the same thing for finding a service provider who can help. And the, so that's the what, the why, and now the how. How did you actually do it? Well, you paid somebody some money and they came and fixed the thing. And when we're in training scenarios or learning scenarios in colleges and universities, we could pay someone to do that. Most of us would call that cheating. And the similarity though is an instructive one. When we think about universal design for learning, you put your finger on it earlier, it's designing our learning experiences ahead of time with the assumption that we're going to have learners from a variable range of backgrounds, level of knowledge, level of preparedness, ability to spend time doing the practice. When your washing machine broke, you probably wanted to fix that fairly quickly.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Oh, yes. I dropped everything to try to sort that out.

### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

All right. So it became priority number one. If you're learning a new skill at work, or there's a new protocol going on with training, that might not be priority one. So having those ways to get people engaged and keep them engaged, if we give them more than one way to do that, they're more likely to stick with us. And if we give them more than one way to take in information, they're more likely to choose a method that allows them to soak it in in a good way. And if we give people more than one way to show what they know, then they're more likely to choose a path that allows them to be successful. And universal design for learning has those three big principles. So multiple means of engagement, multiple means of representing information, and multiple means of taking action and expressing yourself. Now, you could think oh, well, if I have such a variety that I'm planning for, I have to plan for everything, right? I have to plan for learners who might be neurodiverse, who might have hearing challenges, they might be visually impaired, they might get around in a wheelchair, they might have learning disabilities. and I have to then plan for every single possibility. That's not what universal design for learning is about. UDL allows us to say, okay, I'm just going to plan for that wide variety. And a good practical way to think about it is what I call plus one thinking. If there's one way for an interaction to happen now, and when we think about training in the workplace or we think about university, we think about students interacting with content, doing the reading or watching a video or getting prepared somehow. But there's other interactions that we also design for. There's interactions with content, interactions with each other, when they're studying, when they're practicing, interactions with an instructor or a trainer, interactions with support staff, and interactions with a wider community. If there's one way for something to happen now, make just one more way. It doesn't necessarily cover every single possibility. Having those optimized choices is what makes UDL work. People stick with us better, they retain information and learning better, and they feel more like they are a part of the learning rather than apart from it.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Such good options for increasing engagement by giving people choice. And those choices come in many forms, right? You've talked about not only connecting with content, but connecting with others. And when we think about learning, improving your performance in the context of the workplace, You know, connecting with others in the work environment is also an important aspect of planning for how to build skills and continue to improve what we're doing. Can you walk us through some like a real world example? I don't know whether there's kind of one specific project that maybe comes to mind or one program that you've

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supported and give us some examples of these plus one choices to bring this to life in a more concrete way.

### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

Absolutely. As we're thinking about universal design for learning, I've worked with colleges and universities, as well as organizations and workplaces over time here. And one that stands out is I worked with a university in New York and helped them to move from little pockets of people doing universal design for learning practices, based on their available time, desire, interest, and privilege, to making sure that universal design for learning was part of the culture of the organization. And that took a few different pieces to it. So for example, if we're thinking about how learners engage with the institution, their first conversation is often not with an instructor. And it's the same thing if you're thinking about training or development in a company. Employees' first conversation is often not with their supervisors or with the clients that they're going to work with. Their first conversation is often with human resources. Students' first conversation is often with the registrar or the financial aid people. And it's that first impression that carries over into how students perceive the culture and the structure of the organization. So when I worked with that college in New York, three things were key for our work. One, we had the leaders of the organization talk about goals for the organization in terms of universally designing learning experiences. So in the strategic plan for 2025 through 2030, there is now language that says we are going to adopt a goal of making all of our engagements where students interact with us minimally inclusive to meet the legal requirements. And our goal is also to go beyond those legal requirements into making them easier to navigate in a universally designed way using the principles of UDL. Because that was the goal toward which they were now moving, and that was actually the piece that probably took the longest amount of in that whole conversation. But once they had that locked into their goals, then the senior leaders could say things like, we are all moving in this direction, and we will support everyone to move in that direction with us. Now, you've seen in companies and in academia, the mandates, right? You have to do this required training, or you risk not getting your raise or your promotion. And that does get compliance, grudgingly so. Flipping the script on that from you must to we will support you. That's one of the ways in which we can start moving out towards scale. And especially for organizations where resources are already scarce, right? We don't have a lot of extra time, people wandering around idle or funds to be able to put toward a major initiative. It helps to be able to say, here are the things that we're going to take off people's plates, at least temporarily, so that everyone can focus on the design of the engagements that you do with learners. And that was the second big piece. So the first one was having the leaders say, here are our goals. The second part was getting people to have some time to be able to focus on these things and making it part of their job descriptions, or the expectations for the work that they were doing over the course of, in this case, a two-year project.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

So, Tom, can I just ask that when you talk about giving people some time, is this the instructional, the people that were doing the design work, is this like the learning and development teams, or are we talking about the learners? Who are we talking about here? Who are these people that you said that needed to have some more time to focus in on UDL?

### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

In the first phase of the big project, it was the folks in learning and development. So the people who were actually designing the content, the materials, the spaces, the learning management system, the website, all of those kinds of things. And the goal there was to temporarily or permanently take some work away from folks, help to reprioritize. What can we effectively ignore, even though we have to do it down the road, in order to be able to give

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people time? One of the reasons why universal design for learning efforts sometimes fizzle out or they don't grow is that they rely on people to engage in them using whatever spare time they have left over, in addition to the existing work that we're asking people to do. And in today's climate of feeling a little overwhelmed and doing more with less and less and less sometimes, that's a non-starter. So making sure at the organizational level, that people are clearing a path for the work that needs to be done, that's a real key. And you can throw money at it and nothing is going to change. The real challenge is usually time. If people have the time to be able to focus, do the design, do the work, test it, come back and iterate on it, then it's going to be successful. In the second half of that project, to answer your question a different way, we shifted the focus to practitioners. Who are the people who are going to be using those designed learning experiences? And how can we train them to take advantage of that inclusive and multi-path design? So when we think about universal design for learning, there are those three principles, and those three principles fold down into nine guidelines. So areas of practice in terms of access, building, and then executive function. And each of those nine guidelines unfolds now into 36 different considerations. And those considerations are really specific things that people can do in order to apply universal design for learning. Listeners, do you have to do all 36 things? No. It's not meant to be summative. It's meant to be a universe of possibilities in order to help lower barriers where you find them. So you define the barrier, and then you find which of the considerations, one or two or several, actually fit that circumstance in order to help lower those barriers. And once we got all of the practitioners on board, once we got them trained in why this is important, how they could take advantage of these newly, more inclusively designed interactions and engagements, that's when that whole organization buy-in started to take hold. And if you're thinking about the process there, you go from making it possible to making it permitted, that's where you get that policy level, to supporting it, to rewarding it, to then expecting it as part of your culture. And that's the big argument that I'm working on in the next book that I'm writing called Universal Design for Learning at Scales. Listeners, I'm holding up an index card with a little sticky note attached to it that has those five pieces on it and some notes. It literally came to me when I was on one of my morning fitness runs and had to run home with it in my brain until I could write it down. So I've got that sitting right here on my desk.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Fabulous. There's a couple of things you've mentioned that I want to circle back to because they're really common barriers that I come across in my work with organizations that I think some of what you've just talked us through there and in some of the things that you did in this example with the University of New York really play into and help with. No organization I've worked with has ever had too little content. There's always more content than is needed. We are swimming in floods of content these days in the organizational workspace and resources. Apart from time as a barrier, every organization I've worked with in the last three years has had the problem of resources and content being really hard for people to find because it's stored all over the place. Sometimes it can also be compounded by the problem of, you know, if they're in the habit of thinking about how do we connect people with each other to support each other, other people are hard to find as well because of silos in the IT system. You did talk about designing spaces, universal design for websites, for access to resources. How might these principles help us to address this barrier of the friction involved with people in organizations finding the right resources, discovering the right learning opportunities amongst this flood of stuff that's out there, but it's out there all over the place in all sorts of different spaces, stored in all sorts of different ways, described in all sorts of different ways. What advice can you give for an organization whose learning and development team is sitting there thinking, how do we fix this?

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### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

We used to joke around when I worked at an institution in Chicago that, that particular situation of having just spider webs on spider webs of different systems and different locations for things and different naming conventions for data, all of that, we used to call that job security for us, right? Only a few people knew the secret arcane knowledge of how things actually were put together. And you could never fire those people because then no one would know where anything was. That joke belies a real condition, though, and it's a real barrier to learning, progress, and conversation. So when we think about the systems that we are using, we can distinguish between what we might call basic accessibility and universally designed learning experiences. And you can't have universally designed learning experiences without having a measure of basic accessibility. So when we're thinking about systems, data, and information, One of the things that stalls projects, like the ones I help people with, is what we call analysis paralysis. You look at the scope of the changes you would have to make, and it's so overwhelming. I have to retrofit all of my systems. to work on one standard or one taxonomy, and I have to do this by yesterday because there are laws about that kind of stuff, and we've kind of not been too diligent at following them, I won't even bother, right? And the status quo continues. So to address that analysis paralysis, one of the most powerful things we can do has two prongs to it. One, we put a date on the calendar and we say, after this date, we will do things correctly, fully, and right. One of the arguments that I hear from colleagues in industry and in education is that we don't have the staff or the funding or the time to do this extra inclusive work. And the argument that I come back with is it is not extra work. This is labor that we should be doing as a matter of course in all of the efforts that we do when we design systems, when we design learning engagements, and when we're doing user experience or learning experience UX or LX design in the first place. Even folks who are coming out of the master's degree and terminal degree programs these days, in organizational psychology, learning experience design, instructional design. This is what we're teaching them. We're teaching them to do things in an inclusive way. And that means taking the time to fold that into our everyday practices. So wrong number one of that basic accessibility is looking at where do you have those legal requirements? And where are you doing it well already? Who in your organization is already doing it? And you're going to find a unit here, a unit there, a person here, a person there. Find the people who are doing it well already. Celebrate those folks. Find out how they're doing it. Get them to lead trainings internally for folks, to share those good practices, and also to prioritize. And that's prong number two. Where do we spend our effort? And that's why putting that date on the calendar is so important content and materials and systems and designs that we've already done, we are not going to go back and touch those unless we have to. And that's a bitter pill to swallow. For example, the University of California at Berkeley some years ago was sued because some of their content in their courses was inaccessible to students who were blind. And they chose to take down that content from those databases rather than remediate it. And that's a very bad response to that lawsuit. But it's also one that, you know, if you're looking at the budget bottom line, it makes perverse sense, right? It costs less to just take the material down than to actually retrofit or do the work on it. So circling that item on the calendar and saying, as of this date, we're going to do accessibility in this way. And we're all going to pitch in on it and getting some time to train your, your folks in how to do it, how to make it part of your workflows. That prong helps if you have those workflows already adjusted. If you've done the work of saying. You know, we're going to be checking the work that you're doing for these sorts of inclusive design markers. And if it's not there, we're going to ask you to go back and do it. Then that becomes part of the culture. What that does is that then sets up the ability to start looking at the engagements that clients have with us, that our employees have with each other, that our trainers have with our staff members. And looking at the gestalt, the whole thing, starting to perceive where are their barriers. So I don't want everybody to redo their entire business plan. That would be way too many resources at once. What I want you to do is identify



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where are their pinch points. Where do clients come to your website, get to a certain point, and before they can request your services or buy your product, they leave? And where does that happen repeatedly? Where in the process does that break down? The same thing with your employees. When they're being trained, Where do the trainers give them an activity to do and then they get the same email 600 times asking about the directions because they're unclear? Where is it that the trainers share the information in the practice and then everybody gets it wrong and they end up having to do retraining? Where's that? Those pinch points are wonderful places to start thinking with a little bit of universal design for learning, because it allows us to focus our efforts on the places where people already aren't quite making the connection, or things aren't going quite the way we want them to go. With the focus there on those pinch points, it's work that we were going to do anyway. We were probably going to pull that back into the shop and re-examine it and redesign it anyway. So that's a wonderful place to start with those universal design principles, where you move from giving people more than one way to get engaged, take in information, take action and express themselves into those specific considerations of the UDL framework.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

So if I think about how that applies to or how we might then go about addressing the issue of people can't find resources, we've got performance support aids, quick reference guides, job tools. People can't get to them. They don't know how to search that they've stored all over the place rather than try to fix everything. Do your work, go out with the teams you're trying to support, find out what their biggest challenges are, what kind of resources they're looking for, on what parts of the process or what kind of customer queries, and then start addressing those as your, if you like, your pinch points rather than trying to address everything. But also set a calendar date, figure out what your standard approach is going to be from that date to be able to help people to get what they need when they need it and do it right according to whatever that plan is from that date onwards. Have I kind of got it and interpreted it in that context?

### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

Precisely. And listeners, if that's a little too business-speaky for you, can you find anything in the entry hall closet in your home? The answer is usually no, because that's where we throw everything when we come home. We've all got a junk spot, right? There's purses in there. There's a football in there. There's jackets and the vacuum cleaner and all kinds of just stuff in there. And if you keep throwing stuff in there, it just makes it harder to find things later on. Now, you don't have to go in and clean out that closet in order to start putting things in more logical locations after a certain date. Eventually, you're going to have to take a few things out of the closet, but it'll be bits and pieces here and there when you need them, rather than looking at the enormity of cleaning out the closet and thinking, I won't do that this weekend, I'd rather go to the beach. So that's the kind of metaphor for how we approach where we focus our energy with universal design for learning when we're thinking about all of the different kinds of learning engagements that happen in our organizations.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Yeah, I think you've given people some great principles that they could apply to all kinds of friction points and problems in the organization with access, which is fabulous. What have you typically seen in terms of the benefits and value that organizations have gotten out of applying UDL?

### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

Here's a really specific example. So when we're thinking about value and impact, you look at the key performance indicators that your organization values, things like client satisfaction, employee retention rates, training and retraining needs, or rework rates on things. Lowering

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engagement, access, and action barriers for our employees and for our clients has a direct effect on those metrics. For example, when I was working with that university in New York, their disability support office was used to sending out multiple reminders to their client students to make sure that they filled out the needed forms every semester. Now, by sending those initial messages just to their students' academic email addresses, they had to send out 257 reminders, after that 150 second reminders, and 110 third reminders. So the people in the support office were basically trying to track down all these students to get them to fill out the forms so that they could receive the services. And this happens in industry a lot as well. We do a lot of repetitive work, chasing broken processes. Now, our colleagues in the Disability Service Office did a little universal design for learning thinking, and they thought, well, we're giving information out and we're making a request. Can we give that information in more than one channel, more than one format, more than one way? So they sent out the normal request to the learners' academic email addresses. They also sent it as text messages, simpler to their mobile phone numbers. We went from 257 reminders, 150 second reminders, 110 third reminders, to having to send fewer than 40 initial reminders, and zero, yes zero, second and third reminders. That universally designed system of sharing information via multiple channels and multiple formats saved that office more than four work weeks of effort that can now be put every term to more productive use in supporting the learners rather than doing the administrative rework. And that's one of the key ways that we can measure the effect of universal design for learning. Because in that case, that was the only change that they made. And it wasn't like they got a new crop of learners who were suddenly more on the ball or, you know, we can control for other factors. And that was a real clear cut example of giving the information in more than one way, giving people more than one way to respond or share what they know. And suddenly those rates went right up. And it was wonderful because the folks didn't have to start chasing their clients anymore, they could start serving them better.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

A whole stack less friction and frustration for everyone and higher value work being done. Tom, we're drawing to a close in this conversation and like there is just so much we haven't talked about. And for listeners, I'll talk with Tom and we'll add some resources to the show notes. But certainly in terms of if you are an instructional designer or you are a facilitator, this idea of the plus one, Tom, there's so many ways without it being a lot of additional effort, we can give people more choice in how they consume content, what kinds of activities they use to apply, how they respond to assessment activities. There's so much you covered at the AITD session, which we haven't kind of scratched the surface of, but the beauty of this is we've gone to different places than I'd anticipated. And certainly for those who've seen you talk on those kinds of approaches in the past, you've given us something new to think about in terms of the principles of UDL and how we can apply them quite flexibly. Did you want to comment at all on the fact that we barely scratched the surface around some of the stuff we can do as designers and facilitators?

### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

Oh, absolutely. And I'm grateful to end on this kind of a note. When I spoke at the AITD conference in Adelaide, I was working with folks to help them take a step zero in terms of UDL. Here's the basics of it, and here's how you can do this in your own sphere of control and influence. Now, my focus is on universal design for learning at scale. That's the title of the book that I'm about 75% written now, it's supposed to be coming out in 2025. And in that book, That's where I'm going to offer advice to folks who are running companies, folks who are running colleges and universities, the presidents, the boards of trustees, the counselors, and helping them to make UDL a business decision. This actually helps our bottom lines. And for learning and development professionals, who are looking to get started with or expand their use of universal design for learning, I'll point you to four things and we'll put

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these in the show notes as well. The first is the UDL guidelines themselves at [udlguidelines.cast.org](http://udlguidelines.cast.org). And the second one is James McKenna is a colleague of mine. He wrote a book called *Upskill, Reskill, and Thrive, Optimizing Learning and Development in the Workplace*. And that's a UDL book in disguise. He mentions UDL in several places and talks about how organizations can position universally designed experiences in order to help them with those bottom line concerns. The folks at CAST, it used to be called the Center for Applied Special Technology, C-A-S-T, but now they just go by their acronym of CAST. They have a workforce and career education page, where they offer some ideas, and these are from the neuroscientists who figured out universal design for learning. And I would be remiss if I didn't tell your audience to check out the Australian Disability Clearinghouse on Education and Training, or ADCET. And they have a universal design for learning page that straddles the border between workplace and education, and would be a wonderful place to start. So, you know, if we're thinking about sort of knowledge and skills for UDL, I'll wrap up our conversation with the knowledge. Look for the barriers and those pinch points in your workplace and in your client or customer interactions. Determine where you're currently making individual accommodations and look for patterns among them where you could work in a more systemic response way. Study those UDL guidelines and their workplace applications. And then in terms of skills, design the interactions themselves. How do we plan what we will do, provide, and say when people are engaging with materials, with each other, with our clients, and with the community. And then time management and expectations. We're already doing good work in terms of what we might call basic accessibility. So expand on that into designing for variability from the start.

### **Michelle Ockers:**

Tom, thank you so much for landing this whole conversation so elegantly and giving us some tips and great resources that we can go and look at. Hopefully the listeners have tweaked something that is going to help them with some of the common friction points. and some of the opportunities to improve access and to make things more universally available, to make it easy for their organization or people in their organization to know the why, what and how to engage more readily with resources, with learning programs, with learning opportunities. It's been wonderful to have this conversation with you, Tom.

### **Thomas J. Tobin:**

Absolutely. Thank you, Michelle, for having me on the Learning Uncut podcast. Listeners, I hope you've heard at least one thing in our conversation that you can try out or adopt quickly. Now, I'd love to hear from you as well. You can find me at [thomasjtobin.com](http://thomasjtobin.com) and I speak and consult on how to lower access barriers across teams, units and entire organizations. I'm grateful for the chance to talk more about UDL with all of you. So cheers.

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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.

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

### 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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