

Learning Uncut Episode 157
APS L&D Community of Practice – Adam Le Nevez and
Adrian Manning
Hosted by Michelle Ockers



Michelle Ockers:

So welcome to another episode of Learning Uncut. And in the spirit of reconciliation, I'd like to acknowledge traditional custodians of country throughout Australia and their connections to land, sea and community, and to pay respect to elders past, present and emerging. Welcome to Learning Uncut. Today, we have two guests from the Australian Public Service, the APS, Adam Le Nevez. Have I said your surname correctly? If anyone's unsure about that, we will have a link to your LinkedIn profile in the show notes so they can find you that way. Adam and Adrian Manning, welcome.

Adrian Manning:

Hello.

Adam Le Nevez:

G'day.

Michelle Ockers:

And today we are talking about capability building across learning and development teams in a very large decentralized organization with many L&D teams. So let's kick off by just talking about, well, we'll start with the APS Academy, which is where the two of you work. So perhaps you can talk to us about who the APS Academy is in the context of that wider L&D structure within the Australian Public Service and let us know a little bit about your roles.

Adrian Manning:

I might kick it off then. Thanks, Michelle. Both Adam and I look after the learning and development community of practice within the Australian Public Service Academy. Our roles are fairly similar in the sense that we're moderators or stewards of the community of practice. Just to tell you a little bit about the APS Academy, there was a review done on the Australian Public Service about five years ago and part of that review outcome was, one of the findings from that outcome was that there was a little guidance of what is essential or core to being a great public servant. And they dug a little bit deeper from that, and they really identified the need to improve how we collaborate and engage across the public service, across different agencies, across different L&D teams. There was identified also that we needed to strengthen our partnerships and how we engage with each other. We needed to develop and deliver new initiatives to ensure integrity. We had a pro-integrity culture. We also needed to improve and lead and develop our craft capabilities within the public service and also support our professional streams and expand on our evaluation practices. So quite a lot to take in from that review. And from that, the APS Academy was essentially born back in July 2021. So the key principles, I guess, or operating principles of the Academy really followed those six or seven different things that was identified in the review. So there's lots of different areas within the academy that focuses on that and obviously the community of practice is just one aspect that we support L&D practices across the public service.

Michelle Ockers:

And of course, around about the time the Academy was stood up, you also launched your first whole of government learning strategy here in Australia, which Di Hickman has been on the podcast talking about. And I'll pop a link to that episode in the show notes for context. There was a lot going on all at once, right? Adam, you were going to elaborate?

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Adam Le Nevez:

I was going to say that I think an easy way to think about the role of the academy or the APS academy in the system. So it's a very diverse, very distributed, complex system with many, actually hundreds of L&D teams across more than 100 departments and agencies. And our role is really to energize that system and to coordinate and to provide that base kind of capability around crafts which are, so the skills and knowledge and capabilities that are unique or specific to public servants, civil servants if you're British, but are common to all of us. So these are things like partnerships or developing policy. And we have, I think, six or seven crafts which we cover. So our job isn't to do everything for everyone, but it's to really deliver what's common across the whole system to enable that system to perform in a more efficient way and a more distributed way so that the Diplomatic Academy, for example, in the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade can focus on international capability services, Australia can focus on service delivery. And we kind of connect and coordinate and energize all of that. That's the vision anyway.

Michelle Ockers:

So there's a focus not just around those enterprise wide craft skills. And thank you for unpacking what some of those are, Adam. But also, if you like, the kind of the ecosystem, the learning environment, the systemic approach to learning and development, would that be right?

Adam Le Nevez:

That's right. So yeah, we talk about a networked model or an ecosystem or a complex system. And that is really, I like to use that metaphor of like a modern energy grid. So back in the old day, we had a big coal-fired power station that cranked out something for everyone. These days, we need much more nimble integrated systems, you know, so across city or society. There are lots of different things going on, and our job is really to provide the energy for that, but also to make sure that that network is performing the way that the organisation needs now and into the future. So we're not just thinking about what the deficit is in terms of skill and capability needs, but what will it look like in five to 10 years' time, and how do we get ready for that?

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah.

Adrian Manning:

Can I just add to that that the APS Academy is in a unique position because we're seen as a centralised agency. Other agencies will come to us knowing that we have formed relationships, we've formed connections right across government. So they come to us going, we want to do this. We don't want to reinvent the wheel. Can you help us out with that? Or can you point us in the direction of someone else that's done that? So it's a great place. And that's what makes me really interested to work for the Academy is that opportunity to see insights right across government and help people make those connections. And really, again, not reinvent the wheel, but by learning off each other.

Michelle Ockers:

Understand. You talked to us about your role a little in the intro, Adrian. What about your role, Adam? What's your role at the Academy?

Adam Le Nevez:

So I work in the capability strategy and insights team. And so at the moment, I'm looking after the learning evaluation function, both for the academy and in partnership with others for the system, so uplifting learning evaluation capability, and data and insights. So how do we

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gather the right information to understand the needs, but also the performance of the initiatives that we've put in place? And what do we do with that in terms of quality assurance, in terms of continuous improvement, and gathering insights for business decisions around where we invest our time and effort. So it's quite broad. I should also mention that the APS Academy has a staff of 40-something people servicing an APS or a public service that's 160-something thousand. So there's no way that we can do much for anyone, but we can do the way we can add value is through connections, through building relationships, partnerships and networks. And I think that's where the community practice might come in.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. So strong emphasis there. I'm hearing you both talk about connections and making connections across the organisation. So Adrian, are you full time dedicated to the community of practice?

Adrian Manning:

I wish I was, but no, it is a sort of a part time role that I have. So some of the other things that I fill my time up with is, you know, assisting Adam, obviously, but we have certain projects that will come and go. Evaluation is a big piece at the moment. Looking at our data practices is another, even we have a relationship manager model where we sort of connect with different agencies and form a two way relationship with them. So they're just some of the other things that I get involved with. So it's a range of things, but the community of practice is just one aspect of what I do as well.

Michelle Ockers:

Roughly what proportion of your time would be dedicated to working with the community of practice?

Adrian Manning:

Great question. I think it varies depending on the time of the year. It's probably between 0.2 and 0.5 of a full-time role. I think there's certain events that we might hold and obviously they'll need a bit of attention leading up to the event and coordination and running the event and the post evaluation or reporting that's done. There's certainly quiet times of the year as well. I mean, generally learning and development over the festive periods are generally quieter than other times of the year. So that's a good opportunity to take a break or work on other projects as well. Yeah, around 0.2, 0.5 of a full-time equivalent role is spent with a community of practice.

Michelle Ockers:

Great. Thank you, Adrian. I think you've painted a really good picture of, you know, this very decentralised organisation, very large organisation, the desire to reduce duplication, to coordinate and connect better across the organisation. So that gives us some little threads into, well, why do you have a community of practice? Why are you putting this level of energy into it and what key challenges or needs are you trying to address? So, Adrian, if you could talk a bit more about that.

Adrian Manning:

Yeah, the purpose, I guess, or the objectives of the community practice is to provide an avenue for learning and development practitioners to network with each other. It's also an opportunity to build their professional capability by sharing learnings and their experiences, transferring their knowledge amongst each other and really identifying best practice and capability development. You know, there's over a hundred different agencies across the Australian Public Service and there's different cultures and different make-ups and set-ups. Some of them have got a centralised or a decentralised L&D set-up. Some of them are

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micro-agencies with less than 20 people. Some have got over 10 to 20,000 staff members in them. So, the range is quite massive. So having the community there where people can tap into it and really give a little bit back but also at times take a little bit as well. So it's something for everybody I think and certainly that sharing culture is what we want from the community and part of the objectives of the community comes out.

Michelle Ockers:

So how many members roughly would there be in the community? I know this might be a little tricky to estimate, but can you give us a sense of the size of the community?

Adrian Manning:

It's about 1,200 and that's been slowly growing over the last 12, 18, 24 months. We've been quite proactive in trying to increase our membership base and we've probably had about a 10-15% increase over the last sort of 12 months with that. Yes, it's not large when you consider there's about 170,000 people within the public service, but most of our members are directly within the learning and development space or the HR space. And out of that 1,200 odd people that are part of the community, they represent just over a hundred different agencies. So again, from very small, unique agencies, right up to the agencies that have got thousands. We also do have a few members that join us from state and territory governments as well. Their numbers are quite low, but we certainly tapped into some of their unique perspectives from a sort of more of a local government perspective of the differences between state or territory government to Commonwealth government. So that's a unique angle as well.

Michelle Ockers:

And let's have a conversation about how you tune into what your community members need. You talked before about the functions, key purposes of the community being around providing an opportunity for learning and development professionals across the network. And potentially those outside of L&D, it sounds like you're an inclusive bunch and it's not restricted to people who are in formal L&D roles. So an opportunity to network, an opportunity to build capability, an opportunity to share good practice. Wide range of contexts that people are working in. Whilst they're all government, you've talked about the different size of the agencies, I imagine different workplace contexts for some of their workforces they support and so on. How do you tune into and figure out what your community members really need?

Adrian Manning:

When Adam and I first, I guess, became stewards of the community practice back at the beginning of 2023, one of the first things we did was to try to understand what the community actually stood for and who made up the community. So we started doing a little bit of research on just generally what communities of practice are all about. And we reached out to other community of practices to see how they ran their communities, the tools and resources and platforms they used. We did a survey, if my memory serves me right, Adam, to try to tap into what the community thought of the community's practice, and also late last year and early this year we did a survey and the survey had two focuses, the first focus was a look back on the previous 12 months and the second focus was looking forward to the next 12 months and we asked a series of questions about you know what are you focusing on or what do you think you're going to be focusing on over the next six or 12 months and we've really used the data from that survey to help us inform or what have we done that that's worked or what are the things that that we've done that maybe hasn't worked or there's an opportunity to change it. And then we also used the data to inform us about what we want to do moving forward over the next six or 12 months and create a workforce plan to basically inform us what we're going to be working on or focusing on.

Adam Le Nevez:

There's a really important strategic principle for us as well. I think that it's a peer-to-peer group. So even though we represent the APS Academy, it's not the Academy broadcasting to the system. It's creating a space, a safe space, an interesting, I like to call it a cozy bar, where Adrian's the barman mixing sweet drinks or whoever comes in, where people can come and listen to others, share with others, learn from others and set their own agendas, but we're creating that opportunity. So on the one hand, we have something called Coffee Roulette, which is a great little Australian company that kind of matches people who volunteer, and every month you get to, you know, arrange a meeting with a complete stranger, usually over the internet and just learn from them and share that experience. So that's a really close one-on-one random opportunity. We have showcases where people present substantive pieces of work that they've done. We have mini networking sessions during our online meetups that run regularly. We arrange face-to-face meetings now in different cities, as well as Canberra, where most public servants are based. So there's a real range of kind of channels for people to engage. We do newsletters as well. So some of those channels are more broadcasting, but usually they're creating a context or a space where a conversation can occur, and we don't actually mind if we're not a part of that conversation. as long as it's of value to people. And the surveying and listening, we also run an online forum. So keeping our ear to the ground in terms of what people are talking about and what they care about is really helpful, not because we're peddling our agenda, but we're happy when people are talking to each other, basically.

Michelle Ockers:

So you talked about doing this survey kind of once a year. Adam, you mentioned there keeping your ear to the ground, and there's a number of spaces you create for people to have conversations. Is that the key way you're keeping your ear to the ground, watching the conversations, joining in the conversations, or are there other things you do to make sure you're in tune with what people are looking for, what they're working on, what they might need? So that keeping your ear to the ground concept, what does that look like?

Adam Le Nevez:

Well, I think it's monitoring the online forum, for example. So we have an online platform. It's imperfect, but as good as we can get. And people will come there and share. They might post a job opportunity or they might ask a question. Or we might create a conversation topic around learning evaluation, for example. It's one of the things that we've done, like a thread. We might get a small group of people together who have a common interest in developing leadership frameworks or leadership programs so that they can work together. So the survey really kind of informs what we think people need to do and that they care about what they need to do and they care about the skills they need to be able to do the things they've been asked to do, whether that's building a capability framework or all of these things that L&D folk do. And there's a wide range of roles as well. So from instructional designers to admin staff to strategic planners and the rest. So we want to understand and be helpful, but also not take the lead. So, for example, we often get asked, oh, can you post this on the community of practice forum? We say, no, you can, please go ahead. They're sick of hearing from Adrian Manning and Adam Le Nevez, you know, they can hear from someone new and that's really deliberate and important to encourage people to become active participants. We have in our planning, we created this, and this goes back to Glaive and Wenger and the sort of research behind communities of practice that came out of ethnography actually, you know, 20, 30 years ago or more now. And this idea of legitimate peripheral participation. So it's perfectly fine just to lurk, just to come and read the thing. And we don't mind. But we'd love it if you posted something. And if you're thinking of posting something, why not join our coffee roulette? And that way, we want to gently encourage people to become as active as

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they want to at the time that they want to within their capacity. One of the mistakes we made and one of the things that we noticed is kind of over asking people who are keen. So we had people who were really dead keen, enthusiastic and we tapped into them and kind of emptied the well sometimes. And you notice that those people, you know, their behavior changes, maybe they don't stay as enthusiastic as they once were because there's too much. So it's really important just to be gentle and not spook the horses.

Adrian Manning:

Yes. And we've been able to pivot at times as well. And, you know, we've had this sort of plan for 2024. And as Adam said, you know, we look at our online platform and look at the trends or the conversations that are happening and we've certainly had face-to-face networking meetings as well where we ask people, you know, what do you want to see or what's working what's not working? And something that we've done this year was a bit of a hot topic was study assistance. So a lot of agencies will have different study assistance policies and guidelines. And there was quite a lot of conversations from agencies going, I'm redoing my policy on study assistance. What does yours look like? And we thought, well, why have that conversation online? Why not have a workshop where we pull everyone together and we can share each other's policies and discuss the pain points and hit people up with a poll and get their anonymous thoughts on the subject. And that was really good because it allowed a whole lot of agencies to go, oh, wow, you guys are doing that. Maybe we should do that. Or, yeah, I never thought about doing it like that. So it was a really good brainstorming session that allowed people to share, but then they went away with particularly the agencies that were redoing their policies or guidance. They could go away with something. They could go away saying, yes, we have consulted with other agencies. We know this has worked or we know this hasn't worked. So they're getting something out of it. And that was just something that we came up with and from the online discussions going, let's do something because there's enough interest there to do it. And the networking events are another one where we've gone, yes, there's interest. There's someone that's willing to host a networking, a face-to-face networking event. And it's been interesting since COVID where, you know, through COVID we went away from going anywhere near each other to everything has to be online and then now it's sort of coming back to go, well, people really want and need that face-to-face conversation because online you can't have those side conversations. So they've really picked up over the last 12 months is our face-to-face networking opportunities.

Michelle Ockers:

People are very dispersed though, right? I did some work with the Australian Bureau of Statistics L&D team earlier this year, and I offered to go to Canberra to run a workshop. And I was told, well, you'd be the only one in Canberra because we're spread you know, thousands of kilometres apart. So it's valuable and important now that we can offer both channels online and face to face, right?

Adam Le Nevez:

There was a really nice example recently where some colleagues in Brisbane, a big city far away from Canberra, and they wanted to organise their own L&D gathering, but they didn't do it face-to-face, they did it online, but for Brisbane people. And that was a really sort of surprising use of technology. I was like, well, why don't you just go to the pub together? But no, they wanted to do it that way. And that's fine. And, you know, next time they might organize to visit someone's office or a neutral place. But that's a network being born and growing. And it's happening in an organic way. We're giving a little bit of effort or organization or a little bit of a boost where we can, but it's actually really small and to let others do it. And sometimes they take root and sometimes they don't and that's perfectly fine too.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. It feels like there is kind of a level of activity approaches that is planned. There's a level of emergence that you're watching what's happening in the conversations, in the forums and responding to that as needs bubble up. And then there's also this other kind of organic element as people are forming relationships, be it through the coffee roulette or, you know, just people noticing there are others in their area they haven't met and maybe reaching out to each other. There's kind of like these multiple streams of activity being generated through the community, which is really nice. I wanted to come back to the planning, the planned element, and in particular to the aspect around capability build. We've talked quite a bit, I think, about kind of the networking and connecting people and some of the ways that happens. Do you target specific skills and is that off the back of the survey work you do is like the skills that people are interested in building part of that or does the identification of which kind of skills might we lean into and shape our program of work around come from somewhere else?

Adrian Manning:

I think certainly the survey that we do at the end and start of the year help guide us but you know, one of the things that I've learned in this role over the last 12-18 months is there's key things in an L&D area that come and go almost every year or every sort of second year. Things like leadership skills or capabilities, induction training, looking after your grads that come in for the first 12-18 months, managerial compliance training, and then evaluation. So they're sort of five things and then you've obviously got specially, you know, expertise and agency might hold but those five things are very core things that occur in an L&D area and they might go and procure leadership training or they might do it in-house and it runs for a year or two, and then they evaluate it, and the cycle sort of continues. And induction training is always there. You know, sometimes they might not be bringing new people in as much as what they do when they're growing or starting up a new agency, but it's still a focus. And so we know that, and these sort of topics, looking back over a couple of years' worth of chats on our online platform, You can sort of see that comes up every so often and different agencies will be at a different level of maturity with each of those. So yeah, sometimes leadership is probably the number one thing that gets discussed because there's a high cost to it. There's a high value there for any agency, if your leaders aren't trained, you can be in a lot of trouble. So they invest a lot into leadership and you want to evaluate what you're doing well to make sure that you're getting somewhat a level of return on your investment. And, you know, with that evaluation, it's not always about leadership programs, but that's been something that Adam and I have really started to look at over the last few months in particular. And we aim to sort of, I guess, do a little bit of research on these type of things and construct potentially an event that's going to focus on that or reach out to an expert that can present something. One of the things that's happened probably a couple of times this year is we have regular sort of online meetings and two of those meetings will have had people present on their PhD studies. And it's been specifically stuff about L&D, how we function, roles that don't exist now, but will exist in the future, learning and development methodologies and things like that. So presenting their research and that stuff that we often overlook is developing ourselves.

Michelle Ockers:

Yes, absolutely.

Adrian Manning:

And so it's been really refreshing and people have really lent into that going. Yes. I've got an interest there because, you know, I don't have the time to look at this or do the research

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myself, but someone else has, so I'm just going to tap into that and utilize that. So we've done a couple of different things in that space.

Adam Le Nevez:

We've noticed there's not a big appetite for formal learning, actually. Maybe because, as you said, you know, L&D folk are hopeless learners, or they invest all their time and effort in others' learning journeys rather than their own. It's the plumber with the leaky tap. So, yeah, we tried, last year, actually, we tried to set up a human-centered design course, especially for people in the community, and there wasn't great uptake, which surprised us, because we thought people would jump at it. And I think it's, well, I mean, there's a cost involved, but there's also the time and effort. So yeah, as Adrian said, it's very much the practitioner-based learning. So we'll create a forum for somebody who's done some really deep, good work or research in a space to share that with others, rather than putting on courses and things like that.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. And I know you had Charles Jennings come and do a session. I did a couple of sessions on performance consulting last year. It felt last year like you were almost theming. You were following kind of a kind of a theme month to month for a while. Was that something you experimented with or is that something I've just kind of made up? If I made it up, just tell me.

Adam Le Nevez:

I think that was before our time. And I should say this, we should have said this from the start that, you know, we've inherited this, but it's been around for a long time. I'm actually not sure how long, but I want to say at least five years and probably closer to 10.

Michelle Ockers:

At least, yes. I presented, I ran a session actually on L&D skills in 2019, pre-COVID, face to face in Canberra.

Adam Le Nevez:

Yeah. And so that's, you know, we're just the current players in the football team, but the football team's been around before us and will be around after we've retired or hung up our boots. And so back in the past, we did have themes and the academy actually has themes, but this year we've focused more on kind of key topics, so leadership development, and design is one and evaluation is another. There's three or four of them. Accessibility is an important one too.

Michelle Ockers:

So a lot more practice-led, right, rather than necessarily skills-led.

Adam Le Nevez:

That's right. So, yeah, if you're working on this, let's get together and think about it and reflect. And it's not that we think that everybody should follow this, the APS shouldn't create one learning program for all public servants, but different programs that people who are designing their programs should get together and learn and work together and design and develop together so that what they do is informed by the good practice of each other and that there's a kind of convergence of good practice as well so that we're not just putting all our eggs in one basket, but we're testing and refining and reflecting as we evolve over years so that the good emerges and we get rid of the redundant or the unnecessary or the bogus.

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Michelle Ockers:

So is there an example of a particular area? I know you talked about, you know, leadership development, compliance, induction being common needs, clearly common needs right across agency. Do you have an example of a particular topic or skill area that L&D is supporting others to develop where the community you feel has played a role in getting people together and maybe refining approaches or removing some duplication, creating some synergies in some way?

Adrian Manning:

It's a tough question. I think just going back to leadership, I think, you know, leadership's been around there for so long and it's perceived in different ways. And I think it's different, but it can be very much related to management type of training as well. And I think, you know, it's probably not visible on the surface that some of the stuff that we do in that space, but what we do behind the scenes sometimes is very much connect people with other people. And one example is the grad program that we have as part of the APS Academy and is putting people in touch with coordinators of that because agencies might want to do their own thing with their own grads or they might want to put their grads into our program. And even some of the technology that we've used has been a lot of interest in other agencies tapping into that technology. So yeah, sometimes it's just about, you know, putting people into connection with the right people. So then they learn a little bit more about how we have done certain things. The induction stuff is probably the other one that again, it's not so much the community of practice has done, but something that the APS Academy has done is create essentially like an online magazine, which has been so useful for new starters in the public service. And I guess there's two different types of new starters in the public services, people who have been in the public service for quite a while that just moved roles. And then there's someone that's never been in the public service before. And this magazine is an interactive magazine where it targets a little bit of both, but because it's a virtual magazine, they can click on it and learn a little bit more on things that interest them. And they can turn the page if that page is not of interest to them. And what this magazine, I guess, has done is it's really avoided a lot of duplication that's out there in a hundred plus different agencies. It's allowed agencies to tap in and utilise this resource because it's online, available to anybody and made sure that from day one a new starter can get the information that they need to or even there's content in there about how the Australian Government works in general. So I know I've gone back in there and you know, how are laws made in Parliament? Well I know where I need to find that, I can just go to the magazine to find that. So obviously it's targeting new starters but it's a resource that anybody can tap into at any time. And sometimes technology isn't our best friend on day one when you start a new role. So because it's accessible on the internet, you know, you can get your phone out and have a look and read it on your phone even. It's putting people in touch with those resources that they might not have been aware of that the Academy in general has created. I think that's quite a powerful thing that I know, even though I personally haven't created some of those tools, I'm quite proud of the Academy has created those tools for the greater good of the public service.

Adam Le Nevez:

Yeah, I don't think we measure the successful impact of the community in terms of the outputs that come from the collaborations that may or may not come through the academy. But we measure our success by the number of new participants, the number of people who come, and the tacit kind of relationships that are formed. So to use the metaphor again of the cozy bar, we're happy if people come and have a good conversation and we're happy if they leave together as well. But we're not interested in and it's not our business to think about what happens between those people once they've left the bar. But they might come back, you know, and that would be nice, too.

Michelle Ockers:

So it's very much about making the connections to enable people to improve their practice, you know, directly with each other. And I know, Adam, I think it was you who said, you know, part of what you're trying to do is to create intimacy at scale.

Adam Le Nevez:

Yeah. And there's another metaphor I love that comes from international relations, and it's, you know, it's talking about diplomacy, and it's be a gardener, not a mechanic, because you can't be instrumentalist in how you build relationships. Relationships are human things, and they're deeply individual and personal things. And so it's not our job to design a system that will enable people to kind of, you know, work through and then come out, so pop out at the other end as some sort of L&D professional. It's our job to create a space where that professional practice can emerge organically and informally, and formally maybe through connections, through conversations, through people actually. And so the APS learning and development strategy has like four kind of things as work, courses, resources and people. And we're very much in the people space there, just creating opportunity for people who are working remotely and distributed, and maybe connecting people who've never heard of each other's work before.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah, absolutely. So it strikes me then that the way you measure the value of the community is by almost repeat business and growing business, that if there's value, people are going to keep coming back and engaging. You know, the word will spread and more people come along because they are getting value out of it. Would that be kind of a reasonable summation of the philosophy you're taking to? Is this working or not?

Adam Le Nevez:

Yeah, I think, so who's engaging with us and the extent to which, you know, our engagements are, the number of engagements, but the quality of those engagements as well. And I mean, we have noticed this year in particular that lots of people are now coming to us to ask us about communities of practice and how, or we're thinking of setting up one, can you give us advice and that. And so that third kind of third person conversations around the value of the community, I think it's there because, you know, people, it's the power of attraction, right? People are coming to us now to seek learning about how we're doing it, not to say we're experts or, you know, we're just doing our best and making mistakes and being generous with our learning. And that's nice. There's something about that that is actually appealing to people. I should say as well that I think there's a common misunderstanding in the business around what a community of practice is, and that this is the instrumentalist thing again. It's, oh, we have a problem, let's create a community of practice, it will run itself after this program, we'll create this space, and people will continue to share with each other. And this magic kind of fairy dust will land on them, and they'll suddenly become engaged. And it doesn't happen. Most communities are ghost towns because nobody is there to energize it or care about it or grow it from that immature state through different levels of maturity to a point where there is a critical mass of engaged senior practitioners to kind of bring the others or newer people on and into the center of that community. Often we're told that we should step back and let the community run itself. And we know that that's a very risky thing, even in a community that I would say is moderately mature, not highly mature, but moderately mature. And so you pull back to your little seedlings growing nicely, but you stop watering it and, you know, good luck.

Michelle Ockers:

Even an established garden needs some cultivation, right?

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Adam Le Nevez:

Exactly yeah and I think our garden it's a wild english garden it's not a formal french garden with hedges in the row and you can walk on the grass and it is a bit woolly and probably we should mow the lawn a bit more often and whatnot but there are meadows and all these other things that you might enjoy if you come and visit

Michelle Ockers:

Understand. So Adrian, before we talk a little bit more about some of the things you've learned along the way, what is the feedback you get about the kind of activities or the kind of spaces, you know, what is it about the community people tell you in those surveys they find most valuable and useful?

Adrian Manning:

I think the face-to-face networking opportunity has really picked up. You know, we had a period of time there where that obviously didn't happen over COVID. And so when we started doing them again, there was really good feedback from that. Coupled with that was the opportunity when we did them, we made sure that there was an agency that hosted it. And part of the formula, I guess, was that they would showcase what their agency does and the opportunity just to have a look at, you know, behind the scenes work that they were doing or a program that they'd worked on. So it was so valuable for people to actually see those insights. And what we also learned was that it was a side benefit to that agency that hosted it. It was almost like a career opportunity open for people to go, oh, I've gone to this agency. I didn't think I would ever think that I would want to work there, but having seen what they do behind the scenes, if a job opportunity comes up now, I might actually consider changing jobs into that agency. So it became almost like an employee value proposition for agencies to host, which was something we didn't expect, but something that was very welcomed. The other thing that people really liked was just the presentations that people gave about the work that they had worked on. sort of touched on before some research that people had done through their PhDs. But it was also just presentations that people have given about programs that they had set up, whether it was a leadership program or another program, some of the challenges they faced. And often, as most listeners would probably know, sometimes when things don't work are the best stories and they're the best ways to learn as well. And we've always tried to create this safety for people. A lot of the times when we have our sessions online, we don't record them. We often get, you know, people to say, oh, did you record that session? Or will you record this session? And we say no, because we want people to turn up in a live environment. We want people to feel safe that it's not going to be recorded and then discovered, you know, three years later, it comes out that someone said this. And at the time it was totally right, but three years later, it might not be a hundred percent right. So we've created a psychological safety for people to come and present things and a psychological safety for people to come and listen to as well. And not every session we do, but often we also have online networking as well where we set up like breakout rooms virtually just for a short period of time where people can network just for five minutes. And that's provided some really good responses from people that they've liked that the opportunity just to have a quick chat with someone and because it's so hard virtually to do that and you know being only five or ten minutes is enough for people just to go hey I'm you know I'm Adrian I'm from the APS academy this is what I'm working on, what are you working on, oh great we're working on similar things here's my email address or let's connect later on, so they're just yeah a couple of things that have worked really well for us.

Adam Le Nevez:

I think there's one other as well which is working in L&D sometimes you get to work in a big organization with a big L&D team with lots of colleagues who kind of get what you're doing

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and get the value of it and but oftentimes you don't you're in a small team or maybe you're the only L&D specialist working in an HR team or workforce planning or whatever people team and a lot of the work that L&D people face is really kind of trying to convince their executive or colleagues or whatever of the value of their work and it's very nice to be in a group of people who get that and you don't have to sort of explain yourself. And you can just get on with talking about the things that are really interesting and prosecuting those kind of questions and ideas. That's a really nice space to be in. And I think the more we're able to focus on that and create that psychological safety where you can nerd out as an L&D person, then people respond really strongly to that.

Michelle Ockers:

It feels like a lot of the value is connecting with others and learning from and through work, which is fantastic.

Adam Le Nevez:

Yeah. We're not trying to do everything for everyone. We're just trying to create that kind of piece of the puzzle. You know, there are other opportunities or formal learning or whatever, but that's fine. You know, we don't need to be there.

Michelle Ockers:

Yeah. All right, so by way of wrapping up then, you mentioned before that endeavour to be generous with your learning and others coming to you around the question of how do I start a community practice? How do I build a community? How do I re-energise a community of practice? So I'm going to take one key tip from each of you for our listeners if they are thinking about taking a community practice approach building a community practice, either within learning and development or in another area in their organisation, what's one key lesson you've learned along the way you would pass on to them? Let's start with you, Adrian.

Adrian Manning:

I've got probably about half a dozen I could share, but one, that's a little bit tougher, but probably the number one thing is what are you trying to achieve by forming or creating a community of practice? And I've probably talked more people out of creating one than I have talked people into creating one and sometimes having a workshop you know or a series of workshops over three six months is actually going to be a better solution to the problem. So you really have to ask, what's the problem we're trying to solve? Is this a community practice, the right solution? Because there's a lot to a community of practice and it can do certain things and it also can't do everything as well. So what are you trying to achieve by creating a community practice is my tip.

Michelle Ockers:

Beautiful. Thank you, Adrian. Yourself, Adam?

Adam Le Nevez:

Yeah, it's almost the same tip, I think, which is around being really clear of that. I think the communities that work are emergent. So they start really small with a small group of people who share common interest and desire to learn from each other and learn together. And when they work, and they have value, then they grow. And those people bring others in and as they leave, but the others carry the baton and that sort of thing. So to think about, not to think about a community of practice as a solution, but as to spot them where they are and then find ways to support them and to give those communities a bit of love and a little bit of a nudge or boost or strategic kind of structure, whatever that is, but as light touch as possible to enable those things to continue to evolve and emerge as useful kind of spaces for the

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participants. Each community of practice belongs to the participants. It doesn't belong to an agency or a head or some sort of strategy. It's going to work when it's helping others or members of the community, and it's going to finish when it's time to finish.

Michelle Ockers:

Excellent. Thank you so much for sharing your insights on an experience with building and nurturing your community of practice so that others might learn more about being the gardeners rather than the mechanics and the stewards and building intimacy at scale. There's some great advice in there for others.

Adam Le Nevez:

Thank you.

Adrian Manning:

Thanks, Michelle. It's been great.



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

Michelle received the following prestigious industry awards in 2019:

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



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