



How Microlearning Can Improve the Learning Impact of Virtual Workshops

Episode #19

with Joanne Bentley and Graham Edmondson

[00:00:00] **Joanne Bentley:** Hello, and welcome to the Leaders in Learning Design podcast by Blue Consulting and Resourcing, the place to get up to the minute information for cutting edge learning design.

So listeners, we have been talking a lot about reuse and about microlearning. And I think these things sort of blend together really well, especially as we look at the way that learning and learning design in big corporations is changing. And I think it took a global crisis to move L&D (Learning & Design) into this space.

[00:00:46] **Graham Edmondson:** Joanne, do you think it really is changing? We've been saying those kinds of things since you and I got involved in instructional design -- it's a changing world, so to speak. That's a bit of a cliché. Do you really think it is changing?

[00:01:03] **Joanne Bentley:** Well, we've had a lot of small changes that sort of add up over time. Up until COVID and then it was a BIG change.

We couldn't have in-person classes in the way that we'd had before, but we still had a need for learning to occur. So, we had to think outside the box and be much more creative than we have in the past. It pushed us into spaces where we've been maybe a little hesitant to get involved and to really dive into distance learning, remote learning, hybrid, learning. Those things where, "Oh, it will never fly. We'll never do that. We'll never get people involved." Instead of the naysayers winning the day, we HAD to change. We had to move. We had to make it work.

[00:01:49] **Graham Edmondson:** There's definitely that big push. I absolutely see that.

I think you and I have talked about this before. A lot of times people had to adapt. We didn't always do it properly. For example, we saw a lot of courses being delivered virtually that really had no place being delivered virtually [via zoom].

We were delivering the old solution just in a virtual way and that didn't work. You know that we saw courses of one week, two weeks, three weeks being delivered [100%] remotely [via zoom]. Didn't really work, did it?

[00:02:30] **Joanne Bentley:** No, those were painful learning experiences. And you know, we used to joke about death by PowerPoint and then it became "Death by Zoom." So, you compounded your PowerPoint remote reveal one bullet at a time, kind of nonsense with doing it remote as well -- Definitely those courses, they're dinosaurs!

We can't go into those long courses remotely or in a hybrid environment and expect the learner to stay engaged. And engagement is where they learn. So, if you're delivering, learning for the purpose of helping your learner, you just have to stay away from those things.

[00:03:08] **Graham Edmondson:** But what do you do? It takes you X number of weeks to get somebody to the requisite level. You can't change that. What do you do? How on earth do you handle that situation as an instructional designer?

[00:03:22] **Joanne Bentley:** Well, we're seeing a lot more on-the-job training and when we compound those or integrate them rather with microlearning you go back to almost an apprenticeship model that was very popular sort of training in the 1800's, where you learned at the master's feet while you were doing things.

Well, if you can get on the job training where you're applying a little bit of learning, say a day's worth of learning or a half day. And then those things are being reinforced with microlearning, as you are applying it, you get that sense of apprenticeship, that knowledge that's being pushed to you at key points to be able to support your learning.

The smaller the chunks are, the easier it is to integrate into your everyday work, to have that traction for your employer, to be able to get more value and avoid more mistakes. Whether that's a training on collaboration or a training on Agile management, you can use the smaller pieces, whether they're mini courses or microlearning to support better function, better productivity and better results.

[00:04:34] **Graham Edmondson:** You've used that phrase, microlearning, shorter learning pieces. I mean, what are we talking about here? What is micro-learning?

I'm saying that with a smile, because I spoke with a client very recently who defined microlearning, but in *30-minute chunks*. And I think you might have a smaller time span in mind when you're talking micro. Is that right?

[00:04:59] **Joanne Bentley:** Yes. I am thinking a little more granular. A 30-minute course would probably fall in the category of a mini-course, rather than a microlearning. Microlearnings tend to be less than 10 minutes and often fluctuate around five.

There's not a lot you can teach on a single objective, that's less than five minutes where you need some kind of introduction, some kind of activity and some kind of a summary that ties it all together for the learner. Too often I see less effective microlearnings being almost like a multiple-choice question.

That's flipped out via text or some other very mobile application that says, you know, do you remember this fact, or this point from a course. That's not really microlearning as they haven't "learned" anything. You've just triggered some recall.

If you're going to help them really *learn* something, there has to be some application tied to it. Unfortunately, a multiple-choice question doesn't usually hit the spot.

[00:05:59] **Graham Edmondson:** So, you would almost think that within a five-minute learning intervention, people can actually apply what's being learned within that five-minute window. Really?

[00:06:13] **Joanne Bentley:** It's a bit of a stretch, but yes, I do. So, if you take an objective and you say, this is the point when we do this, these things happen.

Think about your situation. How would that apply? You're triggering an application where you've set them up. You've demonstrated it. You tie it to the work that they do. It's a relevant content chunk tied to a legitimate skill gap that actually allows them to now look around their workday and say, where could I apply that point?

Whether it's you know, gender sensitivity, collaboration, or negotiation. We engaged in those activities all day long. So, we're likely to come across a situation we could apply a relevant principle from something like that.

[00:07:02] **Graham Edmondson:** So, in a sense, then I suppose, in the way you describe it there, the application thinking doesn't end at the end of the five minutes. You almost sow the seeds of "how does this point relate to what you do", and that thought can exist and persist outside of the five-minute microlearning. It's something that people can be thinking of during the rest of the working day outside of that five-minute piece, isn't it? You've sown the seed of the application in that sense.

[00:07:34] **Joanne Bentley:** Absolutely! And that's when it lifts productivity. Because they are looking for a place to actually connect it, right now, in the workplace.

Too often, I see instances of folks going to courses and then [when they get back to their desk] they get so distracted by their regular work that they don't actually apply anything. The work just overwhelms them, and they need those smaller learnings, I think to refresh.

[00:08:03] **Graham Edmondson:** Yeah. ...I'm going to sound like I'm cynical about microlearning and I'm really not.

But one thing that does concern me a little bit is I've certainly seen microlearnings that I would say lack any connection. It's just like a random buckshot of lots of short little bits. Some of them stick on the target. Some that don't. It lacks a bit of cohesion or sequence, or I don't know, just a little bit like random buckshot the best way I can put it -- That's not good instructional design!

[00:08:39] **Joanne Bentley:** No, no, you need a learning strategy. And we've talked about learning strategies before, but you need an overarching learning strategy that says for the course of six months or a year, we're going to move learners through this learning sequence. And we're going to do it with a series of mini courses, microlearning, communication reinforcement. You need a plan. You need that high-level strategy. Learner's attention spans are dropping. I mean, we used to say that as humans, we have the attention span of a goldfish. Well, I wish it was that long now! In 2016, you might've expected learners to watch a 20-minute YouTube training video or a safety video -- Those sorts of things.

Now in 2021, learners are already swiping away after 20 seconds of a Tik Tok video that just doesn't seem relevant. They're not interested. Done, next, next! You watch that kind of learner behavior when they're in a classroom and they are dying if there's no engagement and microlearnings hit the spot -- remember five minutes for those Tik Tok addicts is a little long!

They are struggling to stay engaged for five minutes. We have to pivot as learning professionals and think about learning differently.

[00:10:00] **Graham Edmondson:** I think even in some of the four-hour workshops that you and I have been doing recently, Joanne; the virtual workshops. It's interesting that the activity times (the average activity time) has really shrunk.

I mean, I can remember designing 45 minutes activities not that long ago. And it was totally appropriate in the classroom to have that amount of time devoted to a learning activity, but we're finding even virtual worlds are having to really truncate that activity time. Just to retain people's attention, quite honestly. We lose them in the virtual world that way, if we send them off for a 45 minute activity, the chance of getting them all back after 45 minutes,

it's a slim chance, quite frankly, they've gone on and in the meantime been doing other stuff because that's the way people are consuming information.

[00:10:55] **Joanne Bentley:** Yes. And it shows up, I think, in psychological distance. So when you're physically present it's much more natural to have that informal conversation. And when you've got those bullet points that facilitator in the room, so you have that expectation that everybody's going to speak.

When I jump into those breakout rooms with those longer activities, after about five- or 10-minutes' worth of conversation, their done. They don't know what else to say. So unless I'm priming with additional questions, they have a very superficial conversation. And I think even you and I, we know we have to break those activities into smaller chunks to get them to be more successful.

[00:11:46] **Graham Edmondson:** So, if I am a good, but old-school instructional designer, I'm getting worried. Now this sounds like it's quite a different beast. It's not a four-week program anymore. I don't have one-hour long learner activities. I'm having to reinvent myself as an instructional designer. One thing we we've been really hammering home here is the idea that learning times are going to compact, *they need to compact*, attention spans are shorter. What else would you say are the two or three things that I've really got to get my head around as an old-school, but high-quality instructional designer? How do I reinvent myself? What am I going to have to learn and do differently and keep top of mind to be successful in this kind of world?

[00:12:37] **Joanne Bentley:** So, I think the number one thing you have to do is you have to simplify your process and upgrade your skill set. If you do nothing else that is going to make a huge difference for the next 10 years, I think. Because simpler instructional design processes and a variety of skills is going to stand you in good stead -- And I think it always has it. You just get better and better at those things.

But it's not coding anymore! It used to be, instructional designers had to be really good at developing and coding sophisticated learning interactions. But there are so many tools out there that support an Agile instructional design mindset. [Depending on the tool, now] there are instruction blocks and interaction blocks, and you're just rapidly putting those things together.

It's all about clicks now. It's not so much about coding and I don't want you to get stuck in a deep technical area, when you need more Agile tools; rapid video development, rapid course development, things that have mobile versions built in. So, you build once, and it works on a computer. It works on an iPad. It works on your phone. You want to use tools that are supporting those needs. And where possible, you're using tools that support great feedback so that you know how many clicks, how far through this did they get? Did they finish it? Did they pass all the assessments on it? You need all of that being drilled into the systems that you use.

Because you have to mockup in minutes, not months, Rapid design of shorter learning segments with easier tools is going to make you look like a fabulous instructional designer and give massive benefit to your learners. So those are the three things I think that we've really got to focus on. It's not a scary world.

It is an exciting one if you want to learn new tools and new ways of doing things and to support learners doing that -- you don't have to be afraid.

[00:14:48] **Graham Edmondson:** Well, I hope people aren't afraid, but, but I think maybe what we can begin to do over the next couple of weeks, Joanne, is maybe talk a little bit more about some of these things and give people some really concrete direction.

If you like, as to where they can turn to learn a bit more about these ideas and maybe pick up some of these skills and new practices. I think it will be helpful for people if we could maybe just drill a little deeper around these topics because it is it's changing for all of us who've been really, really good at what we do for a long, long time.

We can still be good at what we do, but we're going to have to do it just a tiny bit differently.

[00:15:35] **Joanne Bentley:** Absolutely!

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