Episode One - Graham Edmondson on Virtual Learning

Joanne: Welcome to the leaders in learning podcast, by blue consulting and resourcing the place to get up to the minute information for cutting-edge learning design. Today we have with us Graham Edmundson, the managing director of blue consulting and resourcing. And we're so glad to have you on the show. Welcome Graham.

Graham: Thanks, Joanne, it's obviously a pleasure to be here as well.

Joanne: Excellent. Now you've been an innovator in the L and D world for quite a while now, and we're really pleased to be able to glean from your experience.

Graham It's like, it's the quite a while phrase that catches me a bit, but, yeah, in all honesty, I have. I've been around L and D probably for about 30 years now. And, as you know, prior to this role with blue consulting resourcing, you know, I worked in big four consulting. I run my own consulting, since when you and I first started working together what six, seven years ago. Yeah. And trying it all that time to kind of keep it the front end. It's going to be something we can, bring to bat here.

Joanne: Great. I look forward to hearing your insights on this. So, a lot of us instructional designers right now, we're really wrestling with the issues around COVID-19. So I'd like to get your take on what's the extent that COVID-19 has really impacted your thoughts and plans regarding virtual training.

Graham: Well, I don't think I'm any different than anybody else in the L and D world. I mean, I think it hits us, it's been an immense impact. Virtual learning is nothing new to us and, and people have been working and delivering, designing virtual learning, but right now, that's all we're doing.

So, it's fundamentally, I think, changed everything for everybody because that's the only learning that we're designing and delivering at this point in time. So, I think the short answer is it's a huge fundamental shift. Something that, although we'd been looking at virtual learning and kind of say playing with it, what we see now is it is a push.

Which is an imperative saying that this is the way that we do it and it's the way we're going to have to do it. So, there is no choice about this. This isn't absolute drive into a new world for some people, but this is a new reality. We keep hearing that phrase, the new norm, that this is, this has changed and will change.

Everything that every instructional designer and every facilitator does -- that day to day existence, I think has changed fundamentally and I was reading something just yesterday was, somebody had got a quote said that basically, you know, right now, we're living through the largest live experiments in virtual working and virtual training that could ever be conceived.

Joanne: And there's no choice. We have to be. So, how's the experiment going? Are we doomed for no significant difference? I mean, is this going to be a crash and burn for virtual training? What are you, what are your take on that?

Graham: I think it's going to vary enormously Joanne. And when I say vary enormously, I think there are some organizations, some people and some methods that are going to be very successful. I think we're seeing that people will learn to do things that they will never unlearn. They will be such successful assets, that it will be the way that they do things in the future.

But I also think there's going to be some pretty sad casualties. There will be people who don't want to make that transition because they make a lot of assumptions that aren't born out in reality, they will not succeed. And that's, a huge issue because make the mistake fail to succeed and you've got a credibility issue.

With a learner population, there's going to be very, very difficult rebuild. So, I think the stakes are high. I genuinely do.

Joanne: That's an interesting, take on things. What do you think are some of the biggest challenges that you think those who aren't going to be successful will face when they think about virtual training?

Graham: Well, I think, it goes back to what I was saying that they probably don't really recognize just how different it is. I, and I'll be honest. I mean, I talked to clients, reputable clients. Honestly, I think of historically delivered creative and delivered really, really good learning solutions, but I just don't think, I think they've yet fully appreciated the impact of this underestimating the significance.

And, and what needs to be done. And I'll give you an example. We were talking to a client who was conceiving delivering a six-week onboarding program virtually, just a month after the, the COVID-19, announcements and changes and work habits. Well, it's scheduled people being hired, going to train them and we'll just do it virtually.

And that for me, just captured the issue that we have because the bottom line is you can't just do it virtually, you know, can you imagine six weeks, six weeks of eigh hour learner days, nine o'clock till five o'clock with an hour for lunch being delivered virtually for a worker who probably didn't want to be working from home or learning from home who may very well have a spouse, a significant other, a dog, whatever in the place.

So it was never designed for learning. I don't see how that happens. And I don't think in that case, the client can grasp that. So, if it's fundable to the idea that they think we'll just do it virtually, that means that they're going to do probably very little. In terms of redesigning a instructional design and the learning experience itself, the facilitators will probably go at it

very much like they have done successfully in the classroom. And that to me is the kind of template for disaster, that doesn't sound like it's going to work.

There is so much you have to do. And if you don't grasp that, I think people are on the road for a few surprises and a few bumps. Yeah, pretty common that folks don't see a big difference between a virtual learning environment and the classroom learning environment, other than the technology.

Joanne: What do you think they have to, adjust if they're going to make their shift and really understand, how things are different.

Graham: Within the virtual learning environment, when we're thinking about the people who need to realize, and, and, and people who need to react, it's the people on, if you like our side of the fence, the instructional designers and the facilitators, all the people, making those decisions.

And what I think they have to do is to their absolute utmost. To put themselves on the other side of the fence and think about the rest. The learner population is going to face the kind of challenges that those learners are going to have. And when you can do that, when you put yourself in the position of somebody who's going to be, and I'll use the woods subjected to six weeks of virtual learning, if you put yourself in that kind of position, it won't take you long to grasp the realities.

The realities are that as Instructional designers you've got to design something wholly different to what worked well in the classroom. I'll hint at the kind of things, Joanne. I think we've got to look at dramatically reducing the learner contact time. The virtual class experience in time sense has got to be much reduced from an eight-hour day.

And we've got to find alternatives to that. And the facilitators delivering it, no matter how long it is, those facilitators have got to have a somewhat different style, relying on things that they may not have had to use in the classroom, but they will have to use. And, the new norm of the virtual classrooms.

So there's massive challenges for instructional designers, for facilitators and for people making the decisions. All of those things have to be done with a focus on the learner. It's the learner who struggles and suffers in this kind of situation.

Joanne:You're very, on point there, I find that learners, don't want to be on the receiving end of direct instruction in the virtual learning environment that, it is not the best use of their time. Talk to me a little bit about engagement and, and how you think, Instructional designers have to adjust. I think we've been in trouble. I'm just trying to get something out there for the last couple of months and I don't see that as sustainable. Yeah. And we've got

to do something different and to me, yeah. It feels like it's around engagement. What are your thoughts?

Graham: Yeah, I think engagement is it's going to be a key word here because that's the big challenge because without the funds proximity, without the ability to be in physical contact, as it were in the same room, you inevitably struggle for engagement with people.

On the other end of a virtual learning experience you have distractions. They have things getting in the way they are prone to disengage. That can be true in a classroom experience, but it's acutely more true in a virtual experience. So I think engagement is the absolute key, and I think what we've got to avoid is kind of hoping that the facilitators will bring that magic engagement because they're good facilitators. Because how they engage people I think is going to have to be a little bit different. I spent a lot of time in the classroom, the original traditional classroom. And I now spend quite a lot of time in a virtual classroom.

I know that some of the things that served me well in the classroom as a facilitator just don't work in the virtual classroom. You know, the look, the casual glance, the, that the use of it, body language to send them a message. That's impossible for you in the virtual world. So facilitators on not going to be able to add the magic, just because they're good facilitators.

The instructional designers, I think they've got a lot of work to do to create something that is, for the long term, deliverable virtually. And I say long term, Joanne, because I think what we've seen, even in just a few short weeks or months now, we've seen already a bit of a change of mindset because initially I think it was a massive push to get something out there.

Anything, anything we'll do just do it virtually. And I think people have been seeing and learning through experience that actually what we need to do is something somewhat more fundamental than quickly. Enable it to be delivered virtually that's a short term fix to make it capable of virtual delivery, but we've got to think, I think for the at least medium term and probably the longer term, not only is it capable of being delivered virtually, but is it going to be anywhere near the same learning experience as it used to be in the classroom?

And the answer has to be yes. There's massive amounts of work to be done to make that the case, in my opinion.

Joanne: What do you think is the outlook for virtual training in the next year or so? We've had so much, rubbish training go up in the last month or so as we've operated in triage mode. What do you think that outlook is for virtual training in the next year or so? I'm really concerned that we've got trash out there. How do we, how do we flex and pivot?

Graham: Well, I think we've got a fairly short window of opportunity in that regard. First of all, I mean the reality is virtual learning is here. Like it or not, it's here and it's going to stay, you know, I think quite honestly, we are not going to see in any kind of short-term return to anything approximating normality.

The next time a facilitator stands in front of a group of 20 people with a white board flip charts -- everything that they're familiar with using n-- that's a long time away, if ever. And we'll come back to that in a second. So, I think the fact is it's here to stay. It's something we've got to respond to recognize.

And as you say, what we did initially was triage, now at the very least it's time to be thinking about what we need to do more fundamentally to raise the standard and the quality of everything that is out there. Because if we don't, the learner population who have been, I can I use the word burned or hurt or damaged by poor virtual learning -- their motivation is clearly impacted.

Sometimes you don't have a choice about it. People have got to be trained in stuff. They'll have to be trained, you know, compliance stuff and onboarding stuff, et cetera, is that it's not a voluntary thing, but people's appetites. And as a consequence, I'm sure the whole learning experience, is at risk unless instructional designers and facilitators can raise their game in the virtual space to deliver something just as meaningful, if not more meaningful.

Then they used to be able to deliver in the classroom and we can't leave that for another year. We can't leave that to six, nine months down the road because the whole learner population will be jaundiced, will be cynical about the value of what they're being provided. Unless we can do something quickly.

Joanne: That's very interesting. especially when you think about it from the perspective that if we look back in history, when we've had these kinds of pandemic kinds of situations, there's often a resurgence, of the issue, six to nine months later. So, there is the potential, for an even greater need for virtual training. In six months or so if that was the case, what do instructional designers do in the next six months?

Graham: Well, I think we've just got to, let's just say accept it. And as a consequence, fundamentally rethink how we go about things and what we produce. I think that instructional designers, again, to have to adopt a somewhat different mindset and a somewhat different approach to what they've historically. I'm not meaning to criticize instructional designers as a whole here. I'm just saying that there is no way that we can keep the old paradigm and, and expect it to ever be successful.

So I think there are some very specific things that instructional designers are going to have to focus on. And I would say the first of those things is to give the facilitators a chance. And what I mean by that is we now have to look at everything that is planned to be delivered, but virtually, and we have to fundamentally re-engineer. We reengineer it a reduce the learner seat time. That's required for what you might call synchronous learning. Do not give them anything like an eight-hour presentation-based training course and call it a virtual learning experience because it isn't, you have to look at that eight hour duration.

You have to be extremely hard with yourselves and say what proportion of that needs to have synchronous learning time contact. And only that proportion is what should comprise what I'll call the virtual class, and by that, I mean, typically what we've traditionally called presentation stuff, everything like that.

Yeah. It can be done more flexibly. In a different format than listening to receive information. Everything that can be done definitely should be done differently. So we should be looking to designing much more flexible and much more personalized learning opportunities. So that, for example, if we have an eight-hour day, I would think a good virtual design, particularly for a program, which is more than a single day in duration.

A good design would have way, less than eight hours of contact time. It would have learner contact time of let's say it's pick a number two hours, max, which will be 30 minutes at the start of the day to brief. The learners, giving them a large period of time to organize themselves flexibly, to complete certain self-directed tasks, to prepare themselves, to arm themselves, with information, to absorb fact info, and then to bring that to bear in learning events that you can justifiably say, needs to be done in a synchronous fashion with other people. That's the time that I would call it workshop time, everything else will be self-paced, self-directed, self-driven learning that adds to the variety, the experience for the learner. It maximizes the value of the contact time.

Makes a facilitator's job actually a shorter day but hugely impactful time because I have to spend two hours of really impactful time helping people learn, but they should only be in contacts, in my opinion, when they're adding value. And I don't think a facilitator often adds value when somebody can simply assimilate the same information through a different format.

The facilitator would typically be somebody who is adding value through explaining coaching, observing, critiquing, giving examples, and bringing to life things that have been learned. That's quite a lot for me to fire off there, Joanna. Sorry, when I am wound up about something I'm afraid, I, I tend to give it both barrels, but I think this is really, really fundamental.

Joanne: I really like this idea of using the training to actually teach the team members how to be a virtual team member, because what you just described is that ideal day, how do I do the stuff I have to do by myself so that I'm ready to engage in a meeting and to be able to interact. And especially] with new team members. I think that's really key. We can't train them in the old, method and then expect them to be effective team members I'm in this new reality. So I love that that, situation that you're describing there really embeds them in this new reality. I think it does. It actually really brings it home. Doesn't it?

Graham: I think we talked a lot in the past about, you know, making the learner responsible for their learning or owning the responsibility for their learning. And this is where the rubber

really meets road for me, because here, I think we have to do that in the sense that you say you have got five hours or whatever to do whatever it is.

And the learners have to organize themselves and have to organize themselves efficiently. It may not take them five hours. They may be working either individually or there may be able to organize themselves or be organized into learning cohorts. There's all kinds of options. But the essence of it is that you're making the learners responsible for acquiring the information for assimilating the information. And then in the virtual class, they're applying the information and the knowledge that they've acquired, that's my kind of blueprint or template for effective virtual learning. Just rethinking it fundamentally.

Joanne: I love it. I think that's really insightful. So as we wind up our time together today, what would be your top two or three pieces of advice to instructional designers who are faced with rapidly designing and delivering virtual training this week? What should they do differently?

Graham: Well, I'm going to say, easy to say, adopt a different mindset. And that's just the hardest thing you can possibly tell anybody ever to do. But I would really counsel them, as I said, to just do everything you can in their power to put themselves on the other end of this experience and think what it's going to be like, try to put yourself in the learner's seat and you'll begin to appreciate the challenges that you face. I would ask instructional designers to be really, really hard on themselves and starting from the position that most -- this is a really controversial statement --most of what we've delivered in the classroom, as good as it was, won't be successful in the virtual classroom. I think if you start from that mindset and you think critically about what you're creating and what you're migrating from the classroom to the virtual classroom, you need to establish some kind of set of I'll call them risk factors, or you need to heighten your awareness to certain indicators.

For example, if you assume that 40% of any given workshop is presentation, then it's not going to work in a virtual classroom. If more than 40% is presentation, it will never work. If, when you look at those instructor notes, if you don't see at least a single question per page, It will not work in the virtual classroom.

If you see more than 20 slides on average, on a deck of slides, it won't work in the virtual classroom. There's a set of criteria. And, you know, we played around with these Joanne, you and I are looking at what those are. I've cited, just three of them, but there's a checklist. We think of things that will cause concern in an instructional designers mind that says, you know what, we've got some challenges here. We have to be very, very different.

So we have to think differently. We have to fundamentally change our approach. If these risk factors are present. And my experience, this point in time is running most workshops that I've seen against those risk factors. I haven't seen very many tasks that screen for me, meaning that a lot of things that are going out there are barely fit for purpose, if at all. Now that's a gloomy perspective, but I think that's the reality. And I hope that we won't in a

years' time be paying the price. I'm wondering how to win back, learn, because that would be the worst outcome for everybody.

Joanne: I think you're right on the money with that Graham. And we'd like to thank you for joining us today.

Graham: Thank you, Joanne. Thanks for the chance. Always enjoy the opportunity to put my, put my views forward. Thank you for listening.

Joanne: You're most welcome. You've been listening to the Leaders in Learning podcast by Blue Consulting and Resourcing a weekly podcast for cutting edge learning design.