A Rocky Path to Better Content Curation

Episode #23

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 Graham and I are here today; we have a few concerns. So, Graham, tell me about what you've been thinking lately.

[00:00:29] **Graham Edmondson:** Well, what I've been thinking, Joanne is really linked to a lot of what I'm reading and hearing. And what I'm getting at is there seems to be a really big shift towards, and a lot of interest in the concepts of curated learning. And I know a lot of people are going down this path and I have a big worry about what that means.

For a lot of the people listening in today, as instructional designers, that could mean quite honestly, that they become redundant. Because it's about curated learning and providing people with access to lots and lots of different resources. Very little of it is going to need to be "instructionally designed" for a specific need.

And it's mostly just gonna be aggregations of generic stuff. So, it's why I'm honestly worried about the future of instructional design, as such, because I think it's going to become less the case that we need customized [content], specifically addressed to need. In the future, we'll be throwing people a bunch of resources and saying, "figure it out for yourselves -- and I hope some of this is relevant" in a nutshell.

[00:01:49] **Joanne Bentley:** Well, I can hear your concern. And to be honest, I've been teaching instructional design or mentoring instructional designers, almost my entire career. But I don't think that the need for quality instructional design disappears [completely] with curation.

Curation assumes that there's high quality product [out there] to assemble. There are experts guiding with good exercises and activities that help the learner to apply the content. The need for quality content isn't going away, but maybe the *need for as many* instructional designers isn't on that endless upward trajectory. That we're going to sort of level out a little.

I don't know that [curation] makes a strong argument that [instructional design is] going to disappear entirely. There is still a need for instructional experts or learning experts, if you will, that have to create those pathways, that have to create good content.

For example, when I was teaching at a large university almost every department had a version of statistics -- It was a massive overlap that was unnecessary. With the bandwidth for faculty and the need for customizing statistics for their particular field. What was acceptable and not acceptable in agronomy statistics for example, where you can control every element of your experiment, is quite different than what you could do, say in education, where people are notoriously difficult to control.

So, the factors that you can work with and the statistics that best suit vary a little, and you need examples to be able to show quality research [in that field]. But at its core, statistics for research is very, very similar. So, there was a huge amount of redundancy as we looked at the [different] versions of statistics [being taught]. And that's just within a single institution!

Then multiply that across every university that teaches anything related to research or statistics and you've got massive duplication! Also, not everyone does a great job of teaching statistics. So, let's pull [or curate] a few that are really good, that have powerful examples. Let's make it simple and easier for the learner to grasp.

So that kind of duplication exists in industry too, where you might have an OSHA class that exists in pretty much every company where they're talking about safety standards of one kind or another, but safety in manufacturing is not the same as safety at a bank or many other businesses, but the core principles of OSHA are pretty dang similar!

So could we get value from having experts deliver those courses and instructional designers figure out how to flavor them by institution so that customization's still there, but it's not at the unique content generation level. Does that make sense?

[00:05:07] **Graham Edmondson:** It does. And I hear you being positive about that because of the interaction that you are having with organizations who are wrestling with this [now].

But if I'm thinking of, you know, 10 years ago -- If I was an instructional designer in a large organization, it was quite likely that I would receive a call internally that would ask me, "could you put together a workshop on communication skills?" Let's say for my customer service representatives and I would go away and I would spend a few weeks understanding the need. Looking at some models of communication. Trying to tailor a solution for the particular customer service need in my organization. And I'd create a solution.

Now I worry that the organization just says to the customer service reps, "there's a bunch of stuff out there from Skillsoft and LinkedIn learning. Here's a list of them. What 22 different courses pick the one that you think is gonna help."

That's my worry. I think we might be throwing out the baby out with the bath water. We might create such a poor reputation for L&D because we won't necessarily be fulfilling their [learning] needs [with lists of courses]. So, I'm still anxious, Joanne.

[00:06:28] **Joanne Bentley:** It does still have the potential for a spray and pray solution. Here's all the "bits", let's hope one of these meets your need.

But at the same time, it also allows a degree of customization, especially if you're coming at the learning profession from an assessment standpoint. Can I do the needs analysis and diagnose the need and then put together some recommendations -- perhaps your communication issues are written communication.

So, it begins to narrow it down. And I have buckets of options, if you will, that allow the learner to say, "you know, I feel really comfortable standing in front of a crowd doing a presentation. That's not my kind of communication need. I personally, feel that I have this need." But some of those [content] domains are really big and a learner doesn't necessarily know where to start.

We are becoming a swipe sideways society. Where it's like, Humm, click on it. Does it seem relevant? No, swipe. Does it seem relevant? Is this something I want to dig into? Humm, no. Swipe. Oh, maybe this one is, hold on. Let me watch 30 seconds of it. Oh, I really like this presenter. I like their voice. I like the way they are discussing the topic. So, they're more captivating. We're choosing learning based on a lot of other factors rather than their actual expertise. And we may not be as consciously aware of <u>why</u> we are choosing,

because those are all factors that work on the subconscious. So, I do see your concern! It's difficult to be able to say, if this [curated] solution going to meet the need.

[00:08:17] **Graham Edmondson:** You know, I was having a conversation just very recently with an organization who are going down this curated learning path, Joanne. And they were saying that the answer to this is, to quote them "carefully constructed pathways."

I hear that and chuckle, and then I wince! Because I worry a lot that the idea of a truly carefully constructed pathway is a bit of an exaggeration.

Cause I think the easiest way an organization would quickly create pathways, would be just to lump stuff together that looks on the face of it, possibly relevant to a role or a skill. Without necessarily drilling down like you and I would like to [into the content domain], to really understand the learning objectives [and progression of dependent concepts]. To really understand the need and to really understand what the solution's going to address via that need.

I think there's a real likelihood that pathways will be put together far too quickly with not enough consideration, not enough attention to detail and thought. And I bet here's the worst bit. I bet they don't get updated for a long time!

All of that just makes me feel really anxious about the way that this is going to be perceived by learners, who as you say, end up just scanning through a bunch of stuff and doing what they fancy, based on whatever criteria.

At the end of the day, if people's skills and performance don't improve; and if they haven't demonstrably learnt, then people are gonna [blame] the L&D folks. And it's going to taint what I think we've [been] achieving. And I think we might be diluting [our impact] and heading for a [major] backlash.

You know, I'm sorry to be doom and gloom! But what's your thoughts on these pathways Joanne? Have you seen them put together in the way that you would expect and like them to be?

[00:10:26] **Joanne Bentley:** Well, the short answer to that is "no." Unfortunately, to be able to create really good pathways, you either have to

have extremely good knowledge of the learning need, or you need really deep knowledge of the [content] domain. And unfortunately, a lot of learning professionals are being asked to do that with neither of those as their background.

So, domain knowledge within a particular content area; say you are a communications expert. Even within that domain, you probably have a specific focus. So, you are less aware of other sequential pieces of the task that need to be put together in a specific order, why that order is important, and how that order supports final performance. You are trying to understand that but your domain knowledge is really deep and very specific.

So, if you are an expert in communication, you would probably also have expertise in a specific model or a set of models, and you are trying to accomplish that [progressive skill development] goal. So, the pathway that you would recommend is a series of activities and concepts that build on each other to make the learning really effective.

If you understand the learning gap that you're trying to bridge, you know, what the average prerequisite knowledge set is. And then you're trying to say, you know, people who are novice in this can be generally assumed to have this level of understanding. And then we're going to build on that by adding in these additional things so that we can get them to that final [performance] goal.

But what if a pathway is recommended based on other things? One of the most common in the marketplace right now is "recommender algorithms." Something like "people in a role like you took this course, you might like to take this course too" -- I mean, it's built on Amazon's model. Which is really just a recommender system at its heart.

We like to gussy it up and make it pretty. Make [the pathway recommendation] like a library where the librarian looked at that shelf of books and pulled out one or two and put them face out [on the shelf]. [Then if you were perusing that section,] your eye is caught by the jacket of the book. And you think, oh, that one sounds interesting. Let me have a lock and you flick through it. And then you say, nah, it's not really me and you put it back. Your eye was caught by the ones that they're recommending. A good librarian pulls out a variety of books at different times and moves them around, trying to catch people's interests who are already in that section of [content].

So, a recommended system is helpful if it's being recommended based on some [content] logic. So, in a library, it's because you're looking at the cookbooks on Italian cooking. And so, this book by a new Italian chef catches your eye. Cause you are in that section, looking for something inspiring to make or something new that you want to learn.

But when you were shopping on Amazon, the fact that you clicked on something or hovered over something, isn't necessarily an indicator that you want that. And same thing in LinkedIn, just because I pulled up a course for some purpose that you have no idea about. It might have been for my child. It might have been for work. It might have been for a hobby.

Now AI is constantly recommending more courses in that space, as if I have a "learning deficit" in that area. And it's not necessarily based on anything specific for an actual "need". It's all of the peripheral things. And it can get really hinkey fast! Where you get random recommendations and then you know that the business has to make money [through paid recommendations].

So now someone's course that's paying for additional marketing bumps. It has nothing to do with the quality of the course, only that they paid more for the marketing. So, [any quality] curation gets diluted quickly and these pathways become muddled at best.

[00:14:46] **Graham Edmondson:** And it's interesting, isn't it? When that word "pathway" itself. It's being interpreted quite differently in lots of cases. And what do I mean by that? I think I've seen examples of pathways not being a pathway [at all] but being a smorgasbord of things that you might find interesting. And a pathway to me infers a sequence of [content] progression. You start a path at a [logical] point of origin and you follow that path to the [desired] point of destination.

[Unfortunately,] I haven't seen a lot of pathways that resemble that latter [logical] definition. I've seen a lot more that resemble a previous definition. And do you remember a few years ago now, that you and I weren't calling it a pathway, but we were very much involved in creating a lot of what we called "wrappers" at the time?

So, we would look at a training need. And we would provide a "wrapper" which gave an organization a sequenced pathway through some defined learning solutions but providing something [customized] between the solutions

or in addition to the solutions. They were generic solutions we were wrapping them up in such a way [that they had become role specific.]

Back to my example of communication skills for customer service reps; there would've been interim activities, interim assignments, things that connected the generic learning to the next piece of generic learning and to the reality of the very specific job that the person was doing. And I think that, we didn't call them pathways. However, I think those [wrappers] were very close to what I assume is a better way to construct a pathway. It's to give people a specific direction through a range of options, to get to a specific destination.

I think a lot of people are falling short [in the way they're constructing pathways]. I'd say what would be really interesting Joanne is to, first of all, get a perspective from the people listening in here as instructional designers. And also, to get a perspective from them as consumers of learning. And take a pulse check on how they are perceiving what's going on with this big shift.

And I think we could probably try to bring in some people. In either of those two camps, either learners who are experiencing it, or L&D folks who think that it could and should perhaps be done a little bit more carefully and a little bit more thoughtfully than we fear it might be done. Does that make sense?

Do you think that will be a good way to go from here?

[00:17:35] **Joanne Bentley:** I do, because a lot of times learners aren't always aware of what they don't know. So, when you're instructional designer by assignment, for example you probably came from a different area. And so, you may not be aware of all the content that could be out there.

So, it would be interesting to see what learners within these pathways, if they're seeing a similar kind of thing where they sort of feel like there's so many options, that they don't know how to choose to go through it, whereas a sequenced program; and I think that's what pathways are trying to get at is that sequenced recommended system.

Is it really based on all the principles that we would hope as instructional designers, that those pathways are? So, bringing in some experts; folks who are actually in the process of creating those pathways could be really helpful, both from the consumer perspective and from the creative perspective.

[00:18:33] **Graham Edmondson:** I think that's what we should do. And if people wanna respond to this topic, I'm sure there's a lot of interest in what we're saying, either in agreement or in disagree. I think that would be a really interesting dialogue for us to, to be having with people. Good.

[00:18:48] **Joanne Bentley:** Absolutely. I think it's a great idea [to gather other perspectives] Graham! We'll go ahead and schedule some of those in upcoming podcasts. So, listeners, be ready for those [surveys and future podcasts]. [Content curation and learning pathways are] a hot topic that is getting more and more attention.

Listeners, you've been listening to the "Leaders in Learning Design" podcast by Blue Consulting & Resourcing, a regular podcast for cutting edge learning design!

Submit your resume on our website to apply to join the network at https://www.blueconsultingandresourcing.com/careers