Chopping and Chunking into Microlearning
Episode #20
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 again today, really just digging in a little bit deeper into microlearning.

[00:00:31] **Graham Edmondson:** Yeah, we covered the whole idea of microlearning in our last podcast, Joanne, we talked about the basic concepts and the value. And I think maybe what might help is for us to talk a little bit today about a specific example. Because I think that example epitomizes some of the ideas that thinking and the innovation that we can bring to learning in view of what we've learned in the last couple of years.

And what I mean by that, let's think about a workshop that you and I used to deliver. We used to deliver it in an in-person classroom setting, and it used to take a day. Obviously as a consequence of the pandemic we weren't able to deliver that workshop in person over a day. And we moved to a virtual delivery. And in doing so, we obviously looked at the instructional design and crucially, we shortened it. We actually condensed it into four hours of impactful virtual learning. And that's where it's been for the last 18 months or so. And that's been the way that it's been delivered, but I think you and I are always trying to push things and to take things as far as we can a need.

And so that for our work and it's virtual form. I think that could probably be taken into a new form, into a new generation, incorporating a lot of the things that we've learned over the last couple of years.

[00:02:10] **Joanne Bentley:** I really do. And it's not that the workshop part of it disappears, but you begin to lean it out and say, what could you do with microlearning?

What could you do in the form of practice and reinforcement that would allow those strategies that you're trying to teach your learner to really take root and become a part of their everyday practice? Especially when you deal with soft skills, those are things that you use almost daily. And so, taking those pieces out that are knowledge about, or their practice pieces that don't need to have a lot of rich dialogue around them, easily lend themselves to this concept of microlearning.

[00:02:51] **Graham Edmondson:** And then in that sentence, when you say microlearning, you're talking about parsing up what was, let's say of the four hours, let's say two hours of that was for want of a better phrase "instruction." You're saying you would parse that instruction piece into much smaller increments and make it self-directed.

Is that what's at the core of what you're saying?

[00:03:20] **Joanne Bentley:** It is because those self-directed practice and reinforcement segments allow you to maybe reteach a concept and give them an opportunity to look around in there every

day and say, "how do I do this today? What application could I find? What business problem, what human interaction/situation could I apply these concepts to?"

It becomes very practical and very useful. And sometimes it's the criticism we catch as instructional designers is that we create theoretical content that's difficult to apply. And I think microlearning pushes us into the application space in a way that we don't always choose to go.

[00:04:05] **Graham Edmondson:** So, if we have a piece of microlearning, that I, as a learner go through, I understand the key idea.

"I learn" for lack of a better phrase, but then how am I going to apply it? I've learnt it because I've absorbed the information, I've thought about it. I've been challenged in the way that it's been presented. I've got my head around the concept. But how do I actually learn to apply that idea in this kind of stroke?

[00:04:35] **Joanne Bentley:** My favorite kind of microlearning says, "look for a situation like this, and then describe some everyday business situation where it would apply." So, if you were teaching collaboration principles, you would say in your next team meeting or cross functional unit meeting, where you're trying to accomplish some collaborative goal, try this principle -- try and reflect on how this worked for you. Did it resolve the situation? If it's a business decision-making course, then what kinds of business decisions do you have to make today? Choose one and apply the strategy and then reflect on how well that worked for you.

What could you do differently next time? Did it help you do X, Y, and Z? Give them a couple of questions to think about. That sort of microlearning helps anchor the instruction and refresh the concept so that it drives towards more meaningful application on the job.

[00:05:35] **Graham Edmondson:** But if it's all self-directed, do we not lose a huge amount? Because a lot of the learning in our virtual workshops is when people are interacting, and people are learning from each other's perspectives and experiences. And that there's that synchronous learning activity. Which doesn't sound like that's going to happen in the microlearning structure.

[00:06:02] **Joanne Bentley:** Personally, I'm not a huge proponent of just microlearning. So, I think we get more bang for our buck when we pair it with some kind of working human interaction, where we make meaning together as adult learners. We use their past experience. We're engaged in rich dialogue. Those kinds of things really help us to dig in, debate, understand what it is we're going to do differently -- that's where microlearning adds that extra value. It's almost like a hot sauce in the instructional design recipe. It really boosts the flavor, and it boosts impact because you're getting that reinforcement over time.

So, if I was setting up an ideal workshop breakdown, I might take one of our four-hour workshops in a virtual delivery sense, high engagement and ask, "where's the kernels of really good rich dialogue?" Where do I get the most bang for my buck? And where are the concepts we've got to get through and explain?

They're not rocket science. I might put those concept pieces into a pre-work microlearning. Here's some facts, here's some recall, look around, where do you think you might find application. And it's [prework] foreshadowing something we're going to do in a virtual human interaction with really rich

dialogue (that's a relatively small group and open mic's would be my first choice.) So, we're really having that rich conversation. Then after that virtual workshop, then you would use microlearnings again to reinforce practice and drive home those principles.

[00:07:50] **Graham Edmondson:** Okay. So, you would still suggest that we can get a lot of value from albeit much smaller synchronous interactions. It's not like everything can be delivered in small, incremental microlearning pieces, whether it's before, during or after.

You're saying that in order to make some of those pieces really comes to life, there's still some value in the interaction piece, albeit shorter and potentially more impactful, if people have done some pre-work and we'll get some post-work.

[00:08:28] **Joanne Bentley:** I think so. Learning theory has taught us that when you do a one and done learning experience, they're often very enthusiastic to apply it. But then life gets in the way when they go back to their desk, and it doesn't really stick for a good portion of your audience. It wasn't anchored. It wasn't applicable enough for them to be able to see how they're going to do something differently because of that big chunk of learning -- And that's unfortunate.

When you use microlearning to pre-teach and reinforce, you extend that learning event from a really good one day workshop. Suddenly it becomes

- Two hours of in-person.

- A couple of pre-work sessions.

- Multiple, in my opinion, it should be multiple microlearning's after the fact.

If I could wave my instructional theory wand, I would say, " let's do this for three to six months after the initial learning event." Because you're only gonna get really good application if you're reminding them, with some kind of a variable ratio of reinforcement to use the material, to find application. And depending on how sophisticated your system is at pushing out those microlearning's, you could extend it as much as six months but only if it's a key competency to understand and apply.

[00:09:51] **Graham Edmondson:** So, there's quite a few things going on there. The idea of extending let's call it the learning time, you know, to a six-month period. You originally started with a four-hour workshop and that four-hour workshop has now extended over a six-month period. And it's been parsed up into smaller, incremental microlearning pieces with some intersperse, with some synchronous learning activity, which will probably be a lot less than the four-hour time slot that was originally allocated but elongated over six months. So, it becomes more protracted. It allows people to apply the ideas and to learn how they apply. And that's really interesting.

You know, I was talking with a client just this week and they were talking about "modernizing" learning. And I think some of these ideas are very consistent with their vision of modernization. Because I think modernization means moving away from what we're currently doing and making it more well, I guess I'm struggling to find the right adjective here, but just exciting.

Shall we say to modernize it, to update it, to bring it into this century? So, I was explaining that I think there's a risk and it's the old cliche throwing the baby out with the bath water. If we think that

modernization is all about going to mini or microlearning's, curated learning, people picking and mixing, we're going to run a big risk of losing the essence of what learning is about if we're not learning to apply it.

And here's a way, or here's an idea that you would be really putting much more valuable synchronous time. There'll be less of it, but it will be the glue that holds these things together and makes it really, really come to life. If those synchronous events are, when you really focus on application, does that make sense?

[00:11:54] **Joanne Bentley:** It does. And I like the fact that we're not losing sight of the end result, which is that the learner applies the content. And so microlearning works for anyone in any of the four stages of remote work. Whether that's a hundred percent remote from anywhere, hybrid, remote, remote just allowed, you know, a couple of days a week or, you know, or some other flavor.

Microlearning allows for us to take those virtual workshops and just expand that reach into all the different kinds of situations that folks find themselves in now. We learned from the pandemic that we like talking to people a lot more than some of the introverts thought, and they really enjoy their alone time.

But when it comes to learning, we still want to talk to each other for *some* of that time. I think it's a mistake that some of the clients that we've dealt with and that we're seeing in the industry, moving to a hundred percent e-learning. It's just not effective for the human interaction need that we all seem to have, to some degree.

[00:13:15] **Graham Edmondson:** I mean, you could provide to a learner population, the very best curriculum in the smallest of pieces and the vastest arrays of topic and content. Yet potentially no learning might happen because there's no design to how people absorb and apply that information. So, it really is back to say as instructional designers, "Yeah. Once again, the world's changing, we're reinventing the way that we look at things, the way that we do things." However, if we do this properly, we are at the center, designing really good learning. If we're remember that it's all about the end results. It's all about improving people's performance through application of the content.

[00:14:08] **Joanne Bentley:** Absolutely. The return on investment for instructional design has to be driven by results and no matter what the new modern shiny object might be in instructional design, if we stay focused on that folks, we're always going to be in high demand.

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