

The eLearning Coach Podcast #41

ELC 041: Technology Implementations Are About People with Donald Taylor

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Welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast, online at thelearningcoach.com. I'm Connie Malamed, bringing new ideas and tips for success with creating online and mobile learning experiences.

Hello learning people, welcome to Episode 41. The possibilities in our field are changing rapidly, do you ever wish you could just take a moment to get a big picture view of the current landscape and where things are headed? That's what we do in this episode, which is a conversation with Donald Taylor. We also talk about the keys to having a successful learning technology implementation, which is the theme of his new book *Learning Technologies in the Workplace*. Donald is the Chair of the Learning and Performance Institute, Chairman of The Learning Technologies Conference, international speaker, consultant and author. You can find the show notes with resources and more about Donald at thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/41. Here's the interview.

Connie: Hello, Donald. Welcome to The eLearning Coach Podcast.

Donald: It's great to be here, thank you, Connie.

Connie: I read your book *Learning Technologies in the Workplace*. What was your impetus for writing it, what's your mission?

Donald: I love the idea of mission, it makes me sound so grand and important. But I'm just a guy trying to share stuff across the world, and in particular when I find good stories, I share them. And that's really the mission behind *Learning Technologies in the Workplace*.

I've chaired the Learning Technologies Conference in London since 2000, and actually now it also runs in Paris and Singapore, and over that period of time I've seen a lot of great learning technology implementations. But I also know from talking to people and what have you that there are lots of implementations which don't go well. There are also lots of questions people are asking which, if they were thinking about implementations in the right way, they wouldn't be asking. Like, how do I make sure that people are going to turn up and use my LMS once I've

implemented it? Well, that's really asking the wrong question at the wrong time in a process. My point was look back over 16 years, 17 years of implementations, pick out the common themes, the common characteristics, and share those and try to help people move beyond committing the mistakes of the past and build great implementations for themselves for the future.

Connie: That is a grand mission, Donald. You talk about adult learning in the workplace, of course, and it seems so difficult to explain what is going on. Why is that?

Donald: Connie, if anybody comes to you and says they've got the whole answer on how people learn, run a mile; nobody has the whole answer. The reason why nobody has the whole answer is that learning is complicated, and the reason why it's complicated is that it's absolutely fundamental to being a human being. What distinguishes us from all the other animals on the planet and what is the reason behind our extraordinary success is our ability to learn and to communicate what we have learnt to others across not just space but also across time.

So, we accrue information, knowledge across the generations. No other animal does this. So that is a complicated thing, because it's so much a part of who we are. So that's complicated enough in its own right. And it takes lots of thinking from lots of different angles to try and get a bearing on individual bits fit, how the brain works, how we convince people to be enthusiastic about something, how we reduce distraction, for example. There are a hundred myriad things involved in learning. But in addition to that complexity, we have an awful habit of trying to pretend that it's simple.

And there's this thing I call the 'school room assumption' where people, particularly management, and sometimes people who are working in an organization, and very often actually people in Learning & Development themselves, they rock up and they say, Yeah, this is like it was when I was at school. Now, there are many reasons why actually learning in the workplace is not like it was when I was in school. But in particular it's not just a matter of getting people together in the classroom, it's never just a matter of using a course, and it is not as simple as dividing and chopping up information and distributing it to people. But, unfortunately, because that's the sort of, if you like, methodology or the template we have for that in our minds as a result of our education, we end up with a very common misconception across the entire workforce that that's what learning is like. And it shouldn't be.

Connie: So learning is complex, yes, and learning is influenced by the context and our environment and all the changes that are going on. So what do you see is the main drivers of change right now in organizations?

Donald: I sort of vacillate on this slightly, but always end up coming back to just a few essentials. One of which is an economic truth, which is that since the early 70s the way companies are valued has changed. It used to be when I was growing up in the 70s that organizations were largely the sum total of their tangible assets in worth. If you look at, there is a company called [Company Name] that does a survey of the valuable organizations across time, so in the 70s roughly 80%, slightly more than 80% of the value of the Standard & Poor's 500 was tangible assets, and the rest of it, the 20%, was the brand value, the know-how incorporated in the organization.

Now it's completely switched. More than 80% of the value of organizations is intangible, and of that the vast proportion is people and what they can do within the organization, the human capital of an organization. That's a huge change. It used to be that you would invest in your plant and you would get more productive. Now it should be that you invest in your people and you get more productive. But it's a lot easier to buy new production lines than it is to invest in people, much more complex, because, as we said, learning is a complex thing.

In addition to that, we have the extraordinary change of the Internet and the world wide web, which within something like 20 years has made it possible for us to go from a world where knowledge was power to where we could access most of the world's information with a flick of our thumb with a device we carry in our pockets, and nobody bats an eyelid about it, this is extraordinary, but it's such an extraordinary change.

So intangibles are what most organizations' value is made up from. And the key part of intangible information can fly around the world almost frictionlessly and always for free. The result is you've got this hugely speeded up economy where organizations have to be far more agile, organize themselves in different ways in order to compete and to, frankly, not just compete but to stay alive, and we know that organizations go bust at a far faster rate these days than they used to as a result of this increasingly competitive environment.

It's what Erik Brynjolfsson and Andrew McAfee in their book about machine age call a winner-takes-all environment, that's what we're living in now. And when you're in a winner-takes-all environment where your competitors can come from almost anywhere in the globe—thanks to

the world wide web—you're far more challenged to remain competitive. So, the result is people are becoming an increasingly important asset to the organization.

Connie: Which of course is great for the people.

Donald: Well, it should be, shouldn't it? But, of course, what happens then is if people are seen as being assets who are commodities, they're now treated as commodities. So you will be on a zero hour contract with no investment put into you, no benefits, and that's tough, because if you don't like it, somebody else to take your place. The individual, as much as the organization, is also in a winner-takes-all economy, so it becomes much more important for individuals to invest in themselves and make themselves as unique as possible with what they know and they can offer, so they can differentiate themselves and shift themselves, if possible, out of the world of being a commodity. That doesn't mean necessarily being ultra-smart in one particular area. We know that, for example, AI is far better at detecting heart problems now from x-rays than doctors are, because that's the skill which can be computerized, to use a rather old-fashioned term. Just as you can have a bike rider who's a commodity, if your job, a bike rider delivering food or being a dispatch rider, is a commodity, so is being somebody whose sole job is understanding, looking at a picture what it means. The real value for individuals is having both that combination of knowledge and the ability to interpret it.

We're getting slightly off track in terms of implementing learning technologies, but I think it's ultra, ultra on point for Learning & Development for the future, which is that where individuals add value to organizations is in their ability to interpret and to make sense of the world in ways that align with an organization's purpose. And what L&D's job for the future is, is to help them do that, which is very different from the old role of being part of function that supplies them with information and knowledge and sometimes skills. That's a kind of roundabout answer to something you just said, Connie, but I think it's a really important point you made there. Actually this isn't necessarily a perfect world for individuals any more than it is for organizations.

Connie: Yeah, that's true. So, we're in the workplace and everyone has access to the web on their phone and on all their devices, so what has the modern web and what have these modern platforms had on people's expectations for how they should learn at work? Because people are expecting something different, something new from the L&D group.

Donald: Well, they are expecting something new, I don't think they necessarily expect it from the L&D group. I don't mean that in a bad way that they have got used to the idea L&D doesn't

deliver, what I mean is that they expect your organization somehow to supply stuff, they don't necessarily think that any particular department will be responsible for it. And I think that's actually quite telling. But to go back to the question, let's not pin that delivery on to one particular group, but let's say what do people expect from the organization as a whole. And I think one awful thing which the organization carries is that people come to work—and this is not a novel observation—with the expectation that what they get at work is going to be as good as the stuff they use at home.

Guess what, the people producing the LMS is the L&D department do not have a billion dollars a quarter to put into L&D in the same way that Google does, or Amazon, or Microsoft, all these other huge behemoths of software that are vast, and of course they can hone everything down so that it looks beautiful, is ultra-fast and completely intuitive. Now, it's kind of tough on the L&D department, but you haven't got that budget and so it's not going to be like that. Unless, of course, you can use some consumer tools, which I think people can do, during the course of their work to augment what they're doing with the L&D. So I think that's one thing which is very difficult to tackle is the expectation of the learner.

But, on the other hand, the learners are also—I say learners, it's not really the right word—on the other hand, the employees are also usually ready and willing, in a way they weren't in the past, to be content with stuff that is here and now and valuable, rather than stuff which is ultra-produced to a very high specification. In other words, just help me do my job better and I'm good with that. And if you Google “how to have a difficult conversation”, you'll find millions of pages providing information about how to have a difficult conversation, because people have to have difficult conversations all the time at work. And when you're about to do that, you want a cheat sheet that's going to help you, you don't want a scenario-based eLearning virtual reality platform, you probably want a job aid or performance aid that's going to be ten points on a bit of paper, do this, don't do that, it's straightforward. People are looking for the stuff that's sharper to the point.

And that is, again, also a facet of the way people experience technology these days. We're used to be able to do things fast. So that's a good side of it, we can give people stuff that does the job and it's quick and dirty. The bad side of that of course is that it means that the expectation on delivery is different from what it used to be. The expectation has shifted far more towards a rapid solution to a media performance problem than to a longer-term solution. Sometimes that's fine, but there are two problems with that. First of the problem for L&D is they definitely have the bandwidth to deal with all the performance issues throughout that. So—and I will

probably come to this further in the conversation, Connie—L&D needs to shift this approach to what it does in order to be able to meet those performance needs.

There is another problem as well, which is that I think there has been a lot of emphasis on performance, which is exactly right, it's what L&T does, but it shouldn't be at the exclusion of everything else. So we are about performance, but we are also about long-term capability building. And if an organization wants to build a successful plan for itself, not just for the next year, but for five years or so, you've got to have some investment in the long-term capability of the workforce. Otherwise you'll be caught on the hop when you find you don't have the skills in, I don't know, a programming language, or structural engineering, or a foreign language, or some obscure financial methodology which is going to be important, depending on your area of work. Those things need to be the responsibility of somebody to build for the future, and I believe it's the responsibility of the L&D department. And if we allow ourselves to be entirely responsive, because we have a workforce that's very much searching for immediate solutions, then we are doing a disservice both to the workforce and to the organization.

Connie: And somehow we have to help them understand that in many, many cases performance support is what you need, and then sometimes some type of systemic learning is what they need.

Donald: Yes.

Connie: One topic that really fascinates me is user-generated content, how we can make the most out of that, because it's there, it's free, it gets at people's intrinsic knowledge and hidden wisdom from experts who are maybe not on the L&D team. How can do you think the L&D department can benefit from and manage user-generated content?

Donald: I share your love of the value of user-generated content. And I despair at L&D teams who imagine that their role is still to be solely the writers and distributors or deliverers of courses. Yes, that's part of our job, but it's a shrinking part of it. Because we simply can't keep up with the demand, we have to find other ways of getting good stuff out there. Most of the stuff that is out there that people are creating is really, as you say, intrinsically valuable for the workforce, because it does a balancing act between being specific to the organization and what it needs and being general enough to be of wide interest. So it's just at the right point that somebody in the organization who doesn't know about this particular bit can read it from somebody else in the organization, or view it, or listen to it, and they can get value. So that's

user-generated content. How do we put it to work for ourselves? I think there are a number of things.

The first thing is absolutely for Learning & Development to get a new mindset. And that mindset is we're not here solely to create content, we are here-- actually I always say we have to do three things: to support immediate skills needs, to build long-term capability, and to provide the foundations that support those two. Now, what those things refer to are the aims we're looking at, not the medium. So if we shift towards the aims, then any medium becomes a valid way of achieving that. And one of those is, for goodness sake, we've got all these people sharing stuff, typically electronically, I don't care if it's notes from a web meeting, if it's a video that somebody has created, if it's just minutes from a meeting or whatever, there's all this stuff out there that is potentially valuable.

So the first thing L&D needs to do is to make sure that it knows this stuff is out there, and secondly it needs to provide mediums, or media, for sharing. Now, of course, there's a huge potential risk of just creating a vast morass of ill-defined information, not dissimilar to giving somebody the keys to the Library of Congress and saying there's your answer to any questions you've got. But that's no use, is it. So we need, as well as being aware the stuff exists, to finding a way through it.

So I think that we need to be quite choosy about what stuff we pick up on to share. We need to find ways, ideally crowd-sourced, of allowing the cream to come to the top and be distributed, and you can do that with voting patterns or whatever, via a platform. But I would say, as well as that, as well as the finding and sharing piece, and there's also possibly a piece in there about interpretation, so I'm looking for something to help me with this particular problem, ah, well, here are three resources that will help you, is where the interpretation comes in. It's a bit different from curation.

Curation is about making it available, I think the interpretation is for this problem these things probably apply. So we're going to find, we're going to curate obviously, we're going to interpret where necessary, and we're going to share. But I think also there's scope for L&D to provide people with ways of creating their own content which then feeds into that general, if you like, river of content that people can tap into, which is a way that enables them to generate content in a way that is more easily shared. A classic example of this is lots of organizations, and I can think of BT, British Gas, GE oil and gas distribution, Black & Decker, organizations which have used video as a great way of sharing information amongst people, without the L&D department creating it at all, but simply making it easily shared. So that's one way of doing it.

Another lower tech way of doing it is webinars. Webinars are traditionally a broadcast medium; they don't have to be. And if you can get people together to share and discuss key topics in a short period of time, 10 minutes, and record it, you've captured some really valuable intrinsic knowledge that becomes extrinsic and shareable by the medium it's captured, and then becomes available through whatever platform you've got to enable it to be shared. The only job of L&D there is to provide, as I was saying, the foundation, the infrastructures to enable that to happen, combined possibly with an editorial program that says: Guys we need something to discuss, I don't know, cladding on North Sea oil pipelines and the difficulties with repairs during the winter, let's get together and discuss that. So you could get a bunch of people from different parts of world to discuss it online for 10 minutes, you could capture some gold dust there. And actually that particular industry, oil and gas, that's crucial, because for various reasons you've got a cohort of people who are leaving and there's a gap of about 10-15 years before the next big cohort people are coming through, that's a big chunk of knowledge going to walk out the door very soon with oil and gas unless you do things like that. So that's just one example, let's find, let's curate, let's interpret, let's share user-generated content, but also take an editorial policy to provide the platform for people to discuss and capture chunks of really useful information that's tacit in the organization, which you can then share as well. Very long answer, Connie, I'm sorry.

Connie: It's really great, honest. One thing that I really believe our future role will be, and it could start happening right now, is in terms of what you're saying, is that we can empower people to create content and to learn from each other and to collaborate in ways that they have never done before, at least never done virtually, they may ask the person next to them, but I just think it's such an exciting time.

Donald: The issue is not that this is difficult to do technically, because actually it's pretty simple, the real issue is how on earth do we get Learning & Development department to change its mindset and be happy with this new role where it has less control. And as I go around the world talking to people, I'm aware that this is a real issue is people being prepared to say, No, it's something I'm prepared to give up the control of producing content. It won't be perfect but it will be speedy and it will meet a need, and that's what's most important.

Connie: And also with the highest levels, where they go: No, no, they don't know what they're doing. So much of your book is really about learning technology implementation, and just to make sure everyone understands what we're talking about, can you provide a few examples of what you mean by a learning technology implementation?

Donald: The classic example, of course, is corporate-wide implementation of a learning management system. That could be a typically large system that enables people to access assets, resources, courses which enable them to do their job better. But, equally well, it could be the implementation of something like Yammer, which is an internal messaging system provided by Microsoft, like Twitter but for organizations. And it seems so simple that whereas with an LMS you can understand there all sorts of technical issues around making sure the data is right, making sure the bandwidth restrictions aren't an issue internationally, in contrast Yammer seems so superficial, so simple, why would you need to implement. And the answer is that implementation has very little to do with technology and an awful lot do with people, and that's where they succeed or fail.

Connie: And that's what you essentially are saying is wrong with the way learning technologies are implemented in an organization?

Donald: Yes. Technically speaking, it's like the surgery, the doctor says, Well, the operation was a complete success but the patient died. The technology could be implemented perfectly but can still fail to work, because you have done anything else around it. So it's all around, making sure that you've got the people involved right in beginning, the stakeholders. And in the book I give some very specific examples about how to ensure that you're doing stakeholder mapping, your communication plan, and so on, as effectively as possible.

But as long as that, which I think is fairly well understood, it's about being able to have the right conversations, how to have what I've called 'performance consulting conversation', about being able to listen correctly, about being able to use very basic network analysis to know which people in the organization you need to get in touch with. It's also about ensuring there are feedback mechanisms during the course of planning this, in terms of specification, in terms of the rollout, and afterwards to ensure that you know what's working and what's not working. And organizations which do a good job of this never cease getting feedback and making changes to what they're doing to make sure the implementation is right. And that's all about people.

Connie: Your guidelines for doing an effective learning technology implementation were so excellent in the book, and I can just imagine how much more smoothly things would go, and not that they're going to be smooth, there's always going to be problems and issues, but how much happier would people be if they had input and if the right conversations were going on.

Donald: It's very easy to avoid difficult conversations, and I think people do this all the time. And it's easy to focus on the technology and regard this business of implementing learning technologies as being like getting some flat packed furniture, and as long as you assemble each bit according to what the picture tells you and you screw each one up tightly with your allen key, you'll end up with a good piece of learning technology. You'll have a chest of drawers, but it won't be in the right place and it won't be used properly and it might be facing the wall. You have to have the people part of it as well or it's pointless.

Connie: And seems so obvious but yet people aren't doing it.

Donald: Because it's easy to avoid the difficult conversations. It's much more easy to bed yourself down, lock yourself up in the room and focus on the data mapping for your back-end or the x-API to make sure that all the stuff is coming in right to your learning record store.

Connie: I don't want to take up too much of your time, so I would just like to talk about my super favorite topic which is the future. What kind of trends do you think are going to influence the roles that will be emerging in the future, what can we look forward to in your perspective?

Donald: There's two things which are important. One is the technology, and the other is the demands on the Learning & Development profession. The demand on the profession are that they service this new different type of organization which tends to be a bit looser and is operating in a far faster, more demanding, more competitive environment, and we need to change in order to adapt to that technically. There are two parts with that, you've got the learning professional to service those organizations have to have a different mindset in order to be able to do that, which is to shift from this idea that our main role is the production and delivery of materials, through to the idea that our job is to provide immediate performance support, longer-term capability building, and the foundations to support those two. Regardless of whether that means we produce content at all or if we just facilitate conversations in the organization, and that involves a mind shift which may mean that a lot of the skills which we have today become perhaps less important, perhaps redundant. That's one thing.

The other thing which goes hand-in-hand with this is AI. There are lots of things which we talk about which are hot in learning departments at the moment, but to me the one that is dominant over all of those, and which in my life of work in learning development and technology, which is since the mid-80s when I was programming computers, the one that dominates and comes second only to the world wide web and the Internet as an influence is AI, artificial intelligence. All we have to do is look at all the things which are currently done with AI

and consider that this is the very beginning of a journey which is going to revolutionize our lives in a way that is almost impossible to predict right now. Twenty years ago we couldn't have predicted that we'd now be not just having sharing platforms but that our entire ways of life would be different according to the way we share things. People behave differently now to how they used to in terms of how they feel about privacy, because we have these sharing platforms. Extraordinarily enough, people are far more open about some things, far more negative, people are far happier to get angry about some things because of these sharing platforms we've got. We can access information far more easily. And all of this has happened and we've sort of adjusted to it.

Now, AI is going to have the same sort of effect over the next few years. We're going to become used to things being done automatically for us without thinking about it. Right now you start typing something into Google, it will predict how you're going to finish that sentence. Take that as 0.1% of the power of AI. Imagine if almost everything you did was predictable in the workplace and that something could help you do a little bit better. So you're going to sit down, you can write a document, there may be all sorts of habits you've got around writing documents, from your keystrokes, your intervention with the company's servers or the online cloud system is predictable as being suboptimal. Maybe you always go to find a particular place in a particular, whereas in fact you could find it for more easily, or you don't need to because it has predicted that's where you're going, and automatically a document is produced for you from there. Maybe you start writing something and somebody effectively taps you on the shoulder and says, Actually, you don't need to write this because we've already got that stuff here, but what we really need is information on this, could you help with that please? All these things are ways in which AI is going to change the way we work in the future by predicting behavior based on what we do right now.

We will start to adapt to it without thinking about it in the same way that we don't bat an eyelid when Netflix says, Oh, you saw House of Cards, you might want to watch, I don't know, [TV Show Name]. It's just part of life, and it's going to be part of life in the future. It's not going to be the Annoying Microsoft clippy character that comes up, it's going to be almost invisible to the way we work. And a lot of that will be about improving our performance both in the near term and in the longer term. So it's not just a matter of saying you're doing this thing in a slightly suboptimal way, let me show you a way of doing it better, it's also a way of saying, well, you know what, this guy or this woman is on a career track that predicts they're going to end up here, in order to get them there within this profession or this organization or just generally this person's identified they want to do that, we should probably give them some information on here, some suggested reading here, and so on, that will help get them there. All of which isn't

programmed by a person, there's not a person managing a curriculum, it's just artificial intelligence surveying resources available, seeing who's done it already, who is most effective, and thinking that's probably a good path for you. And yet that's been an L&D job in the past.

So I think we can expect AI to give tremendous power to Learning & Development, but also to challenge what we do and where we really add value, because it may not be in the things we think we add value, it may be in something else. My prediction is it will be in the areas of creativity, novelty, unusual combinations and synthesis of things, which are exactly the sorts of things which machines find difficult. In other words, we will help Learning & Develop best by being really human as well as being expert in the domain of Learning & Development.

Connie: If our role is to be the innovators, the creative thinkers, the solution finders, and we leave the more rote kind of figuring out and problem solving to AI, it sounds great. Seems a little scary too [chuckles].

Donald: It is undeniably scary, and I think we possibly, not just in Learning & Development, but generally have underestimated the ways in which the future is going to be radically different from the present as a result of AI. And I don't think anybody is quite prepared for just how different it's going to be.

Connie: What a future we have!

Donald: What a future we do! I'm looking forward to it.

Connie: Donald, thank you so much for this conversation.

Donald: I love chatting, Connie, we could talk all day long, we could have a podcast that lasted 24 hours and we still would not be done.

Connie: That's probably true. Thanks again.

Well, that conversation meandered to some unexpected places. I hope you enjoyed it as much as I did. Thanks so much for listening. Again, the show notes with links to resources are at the elearningcoach.com/podcasts/41. Take care. Talk to you next time.