The eLearning Coach Podcast #42
ELC042: The Power and Practice of Digital Curation
with Allison Anderson and Ben Betts

Show Resource Links: http://theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/42

Connie: Hello learning people. I hope you are doing well. This episode is all about digital curation. I'm speaking with Allison Anderson and Ben Betts, who have co-authored and edited a book on the topic, titled: Ready, Set, Curate! In this conversation, we cover strategies for successful curation, the many uses for curation, social aspects, mistakes to avoid and lots more.

Allison is a Chief Learning Strategist at Learning EcoStrategies. She has more than 20 years of experience as a learning leader in both higher education and the private sector. And Ben leads the team at his startup HT2 Labs, an R&D company for Learning & Performance Technology. Ben is a thought-leader in Learning Technology with more than 15 years of experience and a doctorate where he studied the impact of gamification on adult social learning.

You can find the show notes with links to resources we discussed at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/42.

Connie: Allison and Ben, welcome to the elearning coach podcast.

Allison: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Ben: Yeah. Likewise.

Connie: You both have a new book, Ready, Set, Curate, and I'm really looking forward to speaking with you about digital curation. So that we're all using the same terminology, could you define digital curation?

Allison: We may each have a slightly different definition. I'd be happy to share mine and then let Ben share his as well.

Ben: If you went first Allison, then I can reinforce how good your definition is.

Allison: I have kind of boiled it down into the following sentence. Digital curation is practice of thoughtfully gathering, analyzing, and contextualizing resources, and here's the big finish, toward a specific purpose. And I very specifically added that last phrase to my personal definition of it, because I think that that, for me, is kind of where the juice is of it. That's where the meat of the curation is. But the way we're talking about it is, when you layer in that specific purpose, it takes it beyond a mass gathering of resources, and puts a little more intention into it. Well, not a little more. A lot more intention and thought into what you're doing and why you're doing it. So, that's my definition. Ben?

Ben: No. I can't really top that, so we'll go with Allison's definition. But I think the things you pick up on Allison, are the same things I would reinforce. You know, there's kind of stages to curation, aggregation, synthesis, some ability to synthesize what you've aggregated, and the dissemination of that stuff. But it really does come down, for me, to that framing, that purpose or bias, the lens with which you do something. So that's the difference between a curator and just an aggregator of resources, for me.

An aggregator will gather, without necessarily a framing, or bias, or discriminatory view on things. A curator has an opinion. A curator has a frame of reference, and they have a story to tell. And this is what we see in the news media, and things like that, and it's only just becoming obvious to people in recent times, or the mass, in my opinion. People have always had a purpose or a bias, and it's becoming more obvious today in our political and news climate, that people have always had a bias. But that's really the role of a curator.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). So now that digital curation has become more common, more talked about, more thought of as a strategy for workplace learning, what are the factors that you think make it a viable solution today?

Ben: I think, for me, the biggest trend that's led to curation, the rise of curation being a viable solution today, is the adoption of the internet and everything that comes with that. I'll give you an example. It used to be that there were a number of things that you could never retail online. Maybe, back in the day, you could never retail a book. You could never retail a car. You could never retail a vacation online. And then, of course, somebody breaks that model, and comes off and shows you a way in which you can do it with a book or a vacation. And as soon as

somebody proves that model, then they come along with so much of that, that you have to aggregate. Everywhere I look, online today, is just, aggregation is becoming the norm. In fact, I was going crazy because there's a new advertisement for a service here in the UK, called Trivago, and it stuck in my mind, so the advert works. And their main pitch is that, "Isn't it such a pain that there are so many vacation aggregators out there? Using Trivago, you can aggregate all the aggregators." And you're like, "Oh my daisies."

That's where I'm going with online, and with learning, at this point, is that it used to be that online learning was kind of weird, kind of not really accepted as a medium for doing it, and then it slowly gained adoption. And now we've got this deluge of people saying, "Hey, you can learn anything, everything, online." Content explodes, and then the aggregators come in. So I think we're a few years behind the trends you see in other retail markets online, but learning technology is following the trend. Mass market adoption leads to a need for aggregation.

Connie: So true. Allison, do you have anything to add?

Allison: I would reinforce what Ben said, especially in that what I've seen in learning overall has kind of driven us, I would say over the last, probably approaching two decades, is that people bring what's happening for them, in a technology way, outside of their work life, into the workplace. The factors that are driving them, or exciting them, outside of the virtual four walls of work, really drive what they're asking for, needing, demanding, inside that eight hour day, or that ten hour day, or whatever they're working, in that they're overwhelmed by information. They need some organization and purpose to that. They're looking for that. They experience that externally, and then they come in, and they don't want that same thing happening. They want a little more method. They kind of push us.

I don't know about Ben, but I certainly started hearing more and more people saying, "I can't take any more learning resources. I need to understand what you want me to do when. Why am I looking at this thing versus that thing." And it was sort of this combination of a real desire for organization and purpose, and also an openness to outside resources, which certainly for me, at the time that this was kind of bubbling up, being inside the high tech corporate world, we didn't want external resources at first. We weren't looking for that. We wanted

to do it our way and show our stuff. And it took a while, and it took that external pressure for us to really start to demand external resources be a part of the learning mix, and that kind of led into being overwhelmed, and that kind of took us into a demand for a more thoughtful approach I guess is the way I would put that.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). You're both saying there's a deluge of information. People are feeling overwhelmed, and they're looking for someone to do more than aggregate. They want content that has a purpose and some organization.

Allison: I definitely think so, yeah.

Connie: What are some examples of when and how digital curation can be used in the workplace?

Ben: I kind of think about this in four ways, as all good things in learning are, that begin with the letter I. Kind of inspiration, instruction, integration, implementation, are the four I's that I think about. What can I do with curation, from a learning in the workplace routine. Inspiration is the first part. I see lots of examples of where folks are using their social networks, internal social networks, as a point of inspiration. Somebody is the curator, be it curating stuff inside and outside of the organization, and putting stuff up on a SharePoint or a yammer, or something like that, as a point of inspiration. I think that can be the trigger to want to learn more, to want to go deeper. I'd very much count that as part of our wheelhouse.

Then I think you move into instruction. I wish to curate some materials as a means to instruct. Maybe this is something that most instructional designers will practice in one way shape or the other. They talk to a series of subject matter experts, and then they try and synthesize that in some way. And they probably have an opinion. They probably have a lens. It might be that that lens is the corporate lens, the corporate strategy, or something like that. But there's a view on what those content and resources mean in this context. You can use curation as a mean of how you gather instructional content, and how you disseminate that.

You can use it as a tool of teaching, so that actually, you make that work the responsibility of the student. And this is what I call integration, because what I, things I find, as an instructional designer, is that I get to learn about such a weird and wonderful array of subjects, because I'm doing this curation job. That's what I do, as the instructional designer, is I take this stuff, and I kind of curate it. And I end up learning about weird things, because I happen to do a course on resuscitation, or whatever, and all of a sudden this stuff starts becoming part of me. That integration process, being able to synthesize and particularly judge what is in and what is out, is a teaching and learning thing as well.

And finally, implementation. This is the idea that I can be curating my work, and suggesting what works for me, and working out loud a little bit. So, inspiration, instruction, integration, implementation. I think you can use curation though the whole life cycle of L&D in the workplace.

Connie: Wow. I never expected to get such a good acronym. Thank you.

Ben: Yeah.

Allison: He thinks of frame words.

Connie: It's beautiful. How do you think curation is supported by instructional science?

Ben: I think there's a number of ways you can think about good instructional routines, good instructional science, and curation. I think it does come down to the goals that you're seeking, and what it is you're trying to achieve with a learning experience. But if you think about what I'm looking for in a higher order learning activity. What I'm looking for is an educator, on somewhat of a more difficult subject, of a higher level order thinking subject. Maybe we're getting into leadership or something like that. And we're looking for signs that people are able to critically appraise a range of sources, and form a coherent opinion of that. When you got asked to write all of those essays in college, and things like that, that was the fundamental thing that people were looking for, was your ability to judge a range of sources, to judge the efficacy of those sources, and to come to a sound conclusion, based on a bit of a scientific approach.

If you put that in the context of what a curator does, if that's what we're looking for when we're judging people, have they made the grade at something like grad

school, then it's the same thing you're trying to do in curation here. And you don't have to go all the way to the end of sharing a hypothesis, sharing a method, to prove that your curation was worthy of higher order thinking, or some critical thought. But it's especially relevant these days, as we seek to give people the digital literacy and skills that they have, to be able to judge what somebody says on the internet.

If you think about it, you go to the low levels of instructional science, of the capability that you're looking for from curation. I'm looking for some science that I can train my people to judge what is true, from what is false, from what is a reliable source, from what is a non-reliable source. And that, even at the very lowest level, is a key skill that we should be teaching our folks, in and outside the classroom.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). But that implies, doesn't it, that the curation will have some kind of community, some way to respond, some kind of social aspect.

Ben: Yeah. And I guess that's kind of where there's a difference between keeping a bookmark list for yourself, and then publishing it. And that's a part of what Allison was saying, early on, in the definition of things, thinking about contextualization, thinking about dissemination of stuff. That's a key part of digital curation, is that you publicize your work at that point. Otherwise, it is a bit list making-esque, and you don't necessarily open yourself up to critique, or peer review at that point. Not exactly reliable to suggest everybody who curates has an audience, but if you curate for an organization, or as part of an instructional strategy, there already is an audience somewhere around that, be it an explicit or a tacit one. Depends on what you're doing. I think it's a key part of being a digital curator, is that you publish your findings. And hopefully, that helps to support that level of critical thought.

Allison: I absolutely agree. I think that the way we've approached curation, has been really about the sharing, that otherwise, we're talking about somebody who's collecting a bunch of resources, and maybe they're putting thought into it. But I think implicit in the concept of curation is that you're sharing that, that you are putting it out there. Whether it's collaborative or done on behalf of others, in a one way share, there is more than one human being involved in the curation.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). But for the workforce member, the learner, you think that part of curation is responding. As you were saying, it's about integrating, and having some type of response.

Allison: I certainly think that's where a lot of the learning from it takes place, is in the response to those, to the conversation that can happen. One of the things I like to ponder, because I am interested in communities, and how they learn together, is whether curation forms community, or whether curation comes out of a community. I think that they're very much a part of each other, or they can be. Again, I think it takes a good curator, that's going to make that intentional, but definitely, there's a lot of powerful learning to be had, by having that level of conversation, and really connection with the content that you're consuming from a curator.

Connie: From the research that you've done for the book, the people that you've spoken to, can you think of an example of a community that has grown out of digital curation, or the reverse, where curation grew out of an already existing community?

Allison: Well, it's one of those things where I led a community of practice. And so, in some ways, my thoughts on curation came out of what happened as a result of that community, and as a result of that community curating together. We didn't really call it that at the time, but we certainly were doing that kind of work. Not always well, but we were certainly trying to gather resources, share them amongst ourselves. People had different areas of expertise that they were kind of building off of, and would bring certain resources, based on the kind of slice of the learning function, for example. So in a sense, that's kind of where my thoughts on community and curation come from, is living through that kind of an example.

            I'd have to think about if there are other organizations that we talked to. Ben, you might have some that are more off the top of your head.

Ben: There's a range. There's the kind of formal to the informal sort of side of things. On the less formal side of things, I'm thinking about emergent strategies, or things that happened to occur, as opposed to deliberate setups of, "We're going to curate some stuff." If I think about the more informal stuff, the key case that's

kind of cited here, or for me, is the CIA, because the CIA has a large, internal wicking structure, that's based mostly around principles of curation, and that's how they share intelligence, the intellopedia, around the place. You can draw your own conclusions as to whether that intelligence was particularly accurate at the end of today or not. But regardless, they've managed to come to an environment which, if you think about some of the threats that people perceive in curation, as being that anybody can do anything, or you're going to get people replying, or all sorts of stuff going up there, and it's not really secure, or stable, or this, or that, or the other. Well, there is a sort of practice in the CIA to do that sort of thing. And if they can do it there, I don't know who's complaining at your local retailer, or whatever, about that sort of thing.

I know that that's often my go to in that area. On the other scale of it, there's quite a lot of the kind of people setting up instructional experiences where people are asked to curate, personally, and from observing others, I've seen a reasonable amount of success.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). That's pretty interesting. Thank you. Let's go on to curation strategy. If someone is thinking, "This could work for my organization or my community," what are the keys to a successful curation strategy?

Allison: I think that the curation strategy is what stands in the way of a lot of people trying it out, because I think it seems overwhelming, and as a result, people don't know where to start, and so they don't start, which kind of helps you miss out on a pretty powerful experience, right? I think that you can organize it in a few ways. You can organize your approach, by looking at, first, I would say your purpose. Why are you doing it? In learning, we're used to doing learning objectives. This is the same concept. Why are you doing it? What are you trying to get out of it? Maybe more importantly, what is the story you're telling? We've talked about how good curators tell stories. They have a point of view. There is a explicit purpose to why you're curating. You need to get very clear about that, because that helps you make decisions all down the line of the process.

And that kind of leads you into what is your process, and I can talk about that separately, because I think there's some steps embedded within process. But how are you going to get the work done? You need to get a plan for yourself of how you're going to gather resources, how you're going to analyze them, et

cetera. I think you need to think about the players. We've talked a bit about, is it a collaborative effort? Are there people commenting? Are people just consuming? Is there more than one curator? Does somebody have to approve content that needs to be posted somewhere? Who are the people, and what are they going to be doing, and how are they interacting with the curation as a whole, and with the resources that you're gathering? And then finally, what tools do you have at your disposal, and what tools might you need, in order to address curation?

So I think that those are the four big areas. Purpose, process, players, and tools are really your big four considerations.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative). Nice summary. Well, one thing I wanted to say from reading the book, Allison, is that you don't go into curation lightly, and it really is more complex than people might think. I'm not trying to dissuade people. I think it's a fantastic strategy. But it really does take some forethought, and I'm sure the strategy evolves as you go forward.

Allison: Absolutely. I don't want that to be a huge deterrent for people either. I do think that, while it does take some forethought, and some planning, in putting that strategy in place, I think that on an ongoing basis ... I think it goes back to your purpose, and what are you trying to accomplish. And to Ben's four I's, why are you doing it, and how big is the effort going to be? It doesn't have to be an overwhelming amount of time, necessarily.

In fact I talked with people, once their curation strategy was in place, they had a standing time on their calendar for an hour every Friday where that was their curation hour, where they would be finding new resources, and they would be adding insights and context to those, and posting them in places. And they really kind of time boxed that for themselves. There's different ways to approach it, but it doesn't necessarily have to be a huge time sink, on an ongoing basis. But yeah. I do think, for example, you need to think about, who are your sources, where are you going to locate resources, are there other curators? Going back to Ben's Trivago example, are you going to curate some good curators? Have you evaluated whether they are valid sources? Do you trust them? Are they trusted resources?

You need to go through this process of finding, and then really vetting, your resources. From a list, say, of 25 resources, you may only have two or three that you end up posting for public consumption, because you need to go through a process where you're evaluating them for whether they're useful, and true, and reputable. And then are they timely, or evergreen, is the way I put it, meaning is it a resource that's going to go stale in a week, or is it something that's going to live on for quite a long time, and have purpose beyond the short term?

Connie: Right. So what are the copyright issues? What kinds of problems arise from using resources that are just out there? Are people using journal articles? What kind of issues are emerging, that have to do with copyright?

Ben: I mean, a whole bunch of copyright issues, and things like that. Legal issues can emerge as you go through the process. There's a number of things that you can do to mitigate those. I kind of have three things that I think you have to think about here, but the ultimate one of those is keeping the moral high ground. The three things are does fair usage apply? So there's some legal things around the place. Check the license of things that are going on, and above all, keep the moral high ground. So when I say, checking the license, for example, if you're going to go look at somebody else's website, do they have some terms and conditions that prevent you from curating it, from linking to it, either because you're a commercial entity, or because you've got some commercial element to you, revenue generating element. You might not be able to do that. So, for example, Ted X or Ted Talks, they have something in their terms and conditions that says you cannot use this, within a company, unless you pay. Coursera or Courses, if you're going to curate those, the massive open online courses, then if you're any sort of revenue generating business, then their terms and conditions stipulate that you have to have a revenue share agreement with them.

            Now, I don't know how many folks are actually doing that, but it's there. So, first one, check the license. Look at things like creative comments. Come to understand those principles. Two is apply the principles of fair usage. If you can't see anything in license, you need to just use your judgment around what is fair use of this material? If you curating something destroys the value of it, for the original person, that is not fair. So, if somebody looking at it on your website, takes them away from their website, then that's not going to be fair, especially if

their website is revenue generating. But it could be revenue generating, just from an awareness point of view. Be fair.

And above all, keep the moral high ground. The thing that most people don't often do, is just ask. Just send somebody an email, if you're not certain, and be like, "Hey. I really want to link to this article, because I think you're awesome. 50% of people won't reply. 40% of people will reply just being like, "Oh my goodness. I didn't know anybody read what I put on the internet. And you're kind of like, generally speaking, people are delighted. And sure, some people will say no. Okay. Move on. You've got others. Not enough people necessarily think about that. Again, it goes back to Allison's sort of point, and yours as well, Connie, but this stuff can take time. If you're going to cultivate a good source, then it might be that you've gotta ask them. And that kind of clears you, as far as some of that stuff goes, right out of the gate.

Connie: Mm-hmm (affirmative).

When you see people doing curation, who are new at it, are there some common mistakes that novices can avoid?

Ben: There are kind of mistakes that people make in term of velocity and volume of stuff. So, do people overcommit to , "Hey look. It's Ben's new curation resource, updated daily with all the rest of your stuff. I see people commit to things that they cannot possibly sustain, or that they're kind of underwhelming, of "Hey, look. I will get two new articles to you every six months." Then, that's not such a great thing that's going on. Volume, again, has the same sort of principle, too much too little. And this is going to be a fundamental problem of curation, is that there are some niches in the world, that don't necessarily lend themselves to a whole lot of curation, especially internal things, within an organization, because it might be that there's only two or three of this particular job role, or that particular thing, which can make it hard to get the volume you want to really tell a story.

I see a lot of tech issues. Not necessarily to get bogged down about, but you can see things like, links that don't work, things that move or change. You end up with a 404 somewhere that looks bad. You could end up directing folks to websites that might have great content, but all of a sudden end up with an

advertisement stopping you going on. So, you go and curate something off Forbes, because you think that's a reasonable resource, and then you realize that you've got to sit and wait for their quote of the day every time. You're spending 17 years of your life looking at Forbes's quote of the day, because you can't move on.

Connie: You're supposed to put them into practice.

Ben: Yeah. Sorry, I forgot. Turns out that doesn't work. But you know what I mean. There are mistakes that are there. At the end of the day, nearly all of those are overcome able.

Connie: Agreed. Okay, why don't we wrap up with a look at the tools. If someone is going to start on the path of digital curation, are there certain features that they should be looking for in a curation platform?

Ben: Allison will have some opinions, so I'm going to hand back to her quite quickly on this, but I think it does come back a little bit, to trying to understand your goal, and what those tools are, because there's a whole range of things, things that will help you aggregate, in the first part, things that will help you disseminate, and things that will help you build community around that. So Allison, how do you do it when it comes to actually gathering in the first place?

Allison: Here's what I kind of look for. I think of a few things. One is, what kind of metadata can you have? Are you able to tag things and categorize? You can't carry what you can't find, and people can't consume what you don't post appropriately, right? So, can you organize the information, with the tool that you're using?

            Do you want people to rate or rank, somehow, the resources? And I'll tell you that, for me, I hate to bring specific tools into it, but Scoop.it is a really great example of this. Can you easily provide an analysis of that resource? So, if you go out to Scoop.it, just scoop.it, you will see that as you curate a resource, you then have this large area underneath it, that you can basically add your commentary. So, you can really get into the depth of why did you pick this resource? What does it have to do? How does it tie back to your stated curation objective, that purpose we were talking about before? You can really show that. A lot of tools,

you basically end up with a list, and there are some ways you can organize it visually that help you categorize things, or put some context to it. But other tools really allow you to get a much more in depth look at the resource, and why it's been curated. And so, for me, Scoop.it is one of those that I think it's visually appealing. It allows you to have a pretty good user interface, both for the user and for the curator. You can do that level of analysis that I was talking about.

Ben: Scoop.it is good. I think there's a whole bunch of stuff there that I'd go deep on. There's some other things, that I'm starting to see more, not necessarily just tools of curation, but they're embedding more things. So, for example, I use medium quite a lot, as a blogging platform, and also to read. And actually, one of the few emails I look forward to each day, that comes into my inbox, is medium's sort of curation or digest of things, based on tags of things I'm looking at. And that can lead me down some rabbit holes. I get a lot of emails, and there's not many that make it into my, "I'm actually going to read this, without deleting it." And I'll always read the top level of those things. I think you're starting to see tools of curation being in built to some of these content publication platforms, so they're quite useful. And then, for very practical purposes, I have things like Google alerts set up around the place, following certain trends, and certain things, which works sometimes, doesn't work other times. If you follow coaching with Google alerts, then you end up with mostly NFL, and occasional leadership things. Then you just end up with a whole workshop that's kind of, basically coaching by the NFL.

One that I will give a specific shout out to, which I've been using recently, it's called Anders Pink. This is a tool from some guys in the UK that can provide an API for you to curate content resources directly into your platform somewhere else. They have a quite a neat setup, where you can set up keywords, you can set up the sources that you want it to go through, and then it will go and get that content. And if you're into the sort of technical side of things, you can get it to post that directly into your LMS, or to your SharePoint, or into your things like that, which I think is a very useful tool. It does cost, and it's not the cheapest thing in the world, but in terms of being able to viably publish stuff onto platforms that already exist in your organization, it's a pretty good tool behind the scenes.

Connie: Do you have any other tools that you would recommend, just to give listeners a place to start looking, and to start reading about? Ones that they can ideally use in their workplace?

Ben: Yeah. I have a tool. It's called Curatr, which in hindsight was a brilliant name. At the time, we didn't think, it was 2010, 2011, and somebody came up with the ... actually my dad came up with the name, and I was kind of very disparaging of it. "No. That'll never work. It's no good." And then like, seven years later, it kind of makes me look like a genius, so I'm kind of happy with that.

We have a tool that's called Curatr. It's at the formal end of things. People would use Curatr to create an online course, an online class, based out of content that they found, from either within their organization, or outside their organization. But we're starting to see quite a lot of other tools following suit. So you start to see this next generation of leaning platforms coming along, which are really starting to embed principles of curation, degreed, path gather, things like this, where they're starting to say, "Hey look. You can put together this pathway of content, some of which is inside, some of which is outside the organization." I think that's becoming kind of the norm, so I'll go out there and say I definitely started that, and you can give me all of the credit for all of those things. But I'm increasingly seeing that. And I'm seeing it as a vendor that gets RFPs and things like that. We're increasingly seeing, you must have curation tools in your next generation platform, in order to meet the terms of this thing.

Connie: Interesting. That is a very good sign for our field. I can see things changing more rapidly than I have in years.

Well, Allison and Ben, it's time for us to wrap up. I wanted to thank you so much for your insights, and to Digital Curation. You've been steeped in it, and we benefited from that. Thanks for being on the podcast.

Allison: Thanks so much for having us.

Ben: Yeah. Thank you.

Connie: I really enjoyed this conversation. I know I say it every time, but it's true every time! If you're thinking of starting to curate, I think Allison and Ben really offered

a lot to help you get started. And if you're already curating, I think they provided ways to refine your process and strategy. I really think the essence of their message is that curation is a viable workplace strategy that can be used in many different ways, it's not overly difficult, but start out with a plan and then let it evolve.

Again, you can find the show notes with resource links and a transcript at theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/42. And if you would be so kind, please leave a review in iTunes. That's it for now, I'll talk to you next time. Thanks for listening. Take care.