

The eLearning Coach Podcast #29
ELC 029: Social Learning Is A Way Of Life
With Marcia Conner

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Hello everyone, and welcome to episode 29 of the podcast. So how are things going at your workplace? Are you immersed in an environment of connecting and learning? Are you using new technologies to share and collaborate? Through social learning, organizations and individuals have an amazing potential to be relevant and to create a better world. Our industry can be present to support this and have an important impact on the future.

In this episode, I explore these ideas with Marcia Conner. Marcia is the coauthor of *The New Social Learning: Connect, Collaborate, Work*. The second edition of this book was recently published. She is also the author of *Learn More Now*, and coauthor of *Creating a Learning Culture*. In addition to writing, Marcia describes herself as a change-maker, an 'impactpreneur'. She works closely with big vision leaders, impact entrepreneurs and unreasonable thinkers, helping them use their super powers for good. Here's the interview.

Connie: Hi Marcia, welcome to the eLearning Coach Podcast.

Marcia: Oh, happy to be here, thanks for inviting me, Connie.

Connie: Sure. I saw your new edition of the book and read it. What would you say is the premise of *The New Social Learning*?

Marcia: Social learning, to some extent, is a fundamental shift in how people work. It leverages how we've always worked, but now we have these great humanizing tools that allow us to collectively reach one another, to be able to accelerate what we're doing, and to be able to connect with the people that matter in the moment that we need them, to be able to make good decisions and do the work we need to do.

Over all, we wanted to create a book that conveys to people how this new world of work could work and how learning is a fundamental part of that. It's not a training department off in a corner, or separated from the core work that each person does, but it's a way of life, a way that all of us can be benefitting from the brain shares of the people around us

and be able to help those we serve. And frankly new and more interesting ways, because we're able to connect in real time.

Connie: How do you define social learning as it relates to the workplace?

Marcia: To be very specific, I define social learning as joining with other people to make sense of the ideas and the world around us. It's not a training tool, it's not a set of technologies, it's the how we work, it's learning with people in person or far using these social tools. But the tools now can bridge the distance of time and enable people to easily interact based on their passion or curiosity, their skills or their need. But the learning itself is not dependent on those tools. The tools are a medium to be able to improve the way we connect and who we can connect with.

Connie: You quote Etienne Wenger as saying, "Human knowing is fundamentally a social act." Can you explain what that statement means?

Marcia: Sure. When we hear about the experience of other people, we mash up snippets of data, we understand what they're doing, we add from that our own experiences, and we fit that into our sense of who we are and what we can do. Learning changes who we are by changing our ability to participate, to belong, to experience our life, and to make the world more meaningful to what we're doing. In that way what we know allows us to be people who interact with others and to be improved and to improve the world around us. And they've always been taken, both by what Etienne said, but just the whole notion that he put forward at this point many years ago that it is in learning together that we are who we are.

I'm reminded of something that Jay Cross said in an interview with you a few years ago, that we quote in the book, that very much speaks to what Etienne was conveying, and that is, "To learn is to optimize the quality of one's network." Learning is social, most learning is collaborative. Other people are providing the context and the need, even if they're not in the room. And I think that that just so well conveys the value of this notion of learning socially and why it's so vital to who we are as human beings.

Connie: And I love the whole idea of how the most important type of knowledge is the knowledge in your network, that you don't need to contain it all as long as people in your network have it that's good too.

Marcia: Karen Stevenson once said that, "I store what I know in my friends' heads."

Connie: Yeah, that's wonderful. What kind of changes have you seen in the workplace since you wrote the first edition of the book, was it six years ago?

Marcia: Yes

Connie: So you must have seen many changes since that time. Can you explain what some of them are?

Marcia: When we wrote the first edition of the book, mobile and social technologies were still fairly new. Most senior leaders that we talked with didn't see their value in the enterprise, they saw them as something that people did personally. At best they were a broadcast marketing channel, at worst they were interruptions in the workplace. In corporate settings and schools, educators viewed those social tools as a distraction and a threat to how students learn. Sadly, I find periodically people still have that same perspective, but I see it very, very rarely anymore.

Overall in those days or when we even began this quest, educators were still under the misguided belief that they should, or frankly could, control what other people learned. So in the time since then, and why we realized that it was time to write another edition of the book is that now people have more access to mobile phones than they do to running water, for example. And that's a sad and surprising statistic.

Across the globe everywhere people rely on these tools to collaborate, share information, and they're using them more and more to create change, we're seeing that on the world stage. And so popular opinion about the value of these tools has shifted so dramatically, I feel lost without the connections that these tools afford. So instead of trying to make a case for and convince people that it's important that everyone be learning and working in this social relationship oriented way, we wanted to instead focus the new book on how it is that you can take that learning to the next level, how you can integrate in everything you're doing. And, most importantly, how to replace the practices that should have gone away a long time ago with new, more modern, more useful, more friendly and fun approaches in the process both of learning and sharing, but of also creating what it is that we need to do to go forward.

Connie: So is there an example that you can think of that represents how sharing and collaborating really benefitted an organization?

Marcia: I can't think of any example where that sharing hasn't benefitted the organization and the people within it. What comes to mind immediately is the example

of one organization I spoke with that was going through a rocky shift from realizing this was how the people within that organization really found benefit to be able to do what they needed to do.

So imagine I'm speaking in the Washington DC area to an intelligence organization, a part of the US intelligence community, and, unlike most organizations I go into, I was required when I walked through the doors to turn in every single device I had on me. So my laptop, cellphones and every piece of recordable or transmittable technology on me. And I went and then spoke to a very, very large room full of leaders. And as I was talking to them I got to the point in my talk where I said very candidly just because you have some doubts, if there's value about these technologies in your organization — and this is something I had said in many similar talks — just because you have some doubts it doesn't mean they're not already being used and people aren't really benefitting from them. So it's really up to you to decide if you're going to take advantage of that, you're going to actually help them and make sure that they're learning as much as they possibly can, or you are not in a position anymore to be able to stop that. And then I realized I had turned in all my devices, and every other employee when they walk through they turned in all their devices. So this is an organization for the first time I had been in that the people weren't reaching into their pockets and purses to be able to do this work. So it was an awkward moment and we talked about that and we addressed it but it was really quite jarring. At the end of the day, I have done some work with them, I'm back out of the door and I picked up my devices and I went back to the car, and as I'm sitting in the car I hear a noise, and I look up and I can see that there's somebody in the car beside me on their cellphone, and I hear another noise, something catches my attention, and I realize to the right of me also is somebody sitting in the car with their laptop open on their lap in the parking lot. And as I'm leaving I'm realizing that all these people that's what they're choosing, instead of a smoke break they've gone out to their cars and they're connecting and they're doing what they need to do, but they've worked around the system.

And it was so evident to me at that moment that even in the most stringent controlling sorts of circumstances, it's almost like water still runs downhill, people were connecting because they know that provides value to them, they know that they could reach the people that they needed to, they knew they could share. And we have all grown so accustomed to that in our day in and day out lives that to think that that couldn't also be used in a work setting seems silly to me at this point. And it was a great visual reminder I wanted to share that said let's think about the value not just in the 'here are the seven things we can do', but in a way that says this is an extension of who we are now. And,

frankly, it always been, now we just have the tools to be able to make it work more easily.

Connie: Right. That was a perfect example of how you simply can't stop it. Really amazing. You must have been laughing.

Marcia: It was a little awkward. It was interesting and it was odd.

Connie: In all the people that you've interviews and organization that you've visited, what would you say an ideal social learning culture looks like so people can get an idea of what a goal might be or where they might want to move toward?

Marcia: A number of years ago, it was actually a decade ago at this point, I wrote a book on creating a learning culture. And it's interesting to see that in some ways I wouldn't have said that these two books are related, but when it really comes to thinking about a culture where people are learning all the time, the introduction of social tools and being mindful that we connect to learn becomes more and more clear to me. And a leader that I worked with recently said, "I've heard all the academic definitions of culture, but what I find is that culture is best described by that which none of us are willing to talk about." So we often hear the description of it that it's what happens around here, but I thought it so interesting to think about the converse, that we could really think about it as what people are shying away from or are avoiding. And, in some cases, especially when you're a new employee, those are the things that are the most important to learn, that you don't stick your foot in your mouth. And I thought that was so telling.

So to answer the question specifically about social learning is that a wonderful, rich, robust learning culture is intrinsically social. People are learning with and from each other all the time, and they're not fearful of doing that. That if they don't know the answer to something, somebody else probably does, they can easily find that person or, in some cases, they can find the breadcrumbs that person has left behind, they can find their presentations of their notes or the things that they have said. And so there's that deep and rich and easy connection to be able to do that. And so there's just less of that fear about what to avoid and the conversations we can't or shouldn't have, because not only are there opened physical doors but there's open doors to people being willing and interested and available to share, so that everybody can make good decisions in a timely way and be able to help the people that they serve.

Connie: It just makes an organization smarter.

Marcia: Absolutely. The line I've used for years is that we facilitate a culture where we get better at getting better.

Connie: That's good. I noticed in your book you speak about measurement, why would anyone want to measure social learning? And then on the other side of that, would you convince me that it's necessary, how would someone do that?

Marcia: In working with organizations that have developed that rich culture of sharing and collaborating and working together, I find it very infrequent that somebody says, "Well, how can we measure if that is valuable?" What happens more often is that somebody can look at the investment financially that has been made for example on the technology, the social networks better being used to enhance and to augment that learning process, and they want to be able to show that the cost is outweighed by the reward, the benefit of it.

And so my friend Ben Brooks, who used to lead a wonderful social learning initiative at a large corporation and he is now a corporate business coach, said so clearly that what you really need to do is prove that the risk is outweighed by the reward, make sure that the numerator is larger than the denominator. So we're not talking about-- well, we can, but I don't know that that's really that valuable to talk about did every person meet these four objectives. Some of the ways that we have been so narrowly looking at measurement in the training world for so long, for example. That those methods can still be used, I don't think they're any more valuable than they ever were, those are some of my personal opinions, but where the opportunity for a social setting is to look at really how they're benefitting the organization, which in many ways can be very easily measured. So what's the spread, so when you share something how quickly does it get out to all the people who need it, for example? That's something that can be measured and you can actually start putting quantifiable data around that to show that the value of people hearing about what they need to hear about. Marketing data has been available for years, but we've never really thought about it as person-to-person sharing of information, for example.

One organization I work with has a hashtag they use on a social network, which is #moneysaved, and so every time somebody, for example, finds somebody within the organization who can quickly and easily do some work that they're about to spend their ten or twelve thousand dollars to hire from an outside contractor, they post it to that hash tag there. At the end of every month somebody goes through all those hashtags, puts them in a spreadsheet, they add up all the money, and they can see on a monthly basis how much money was saved as a result of people being able to learn from one

another in a social way. So those are types of measurements that prove very helpful for those who want to quantify many things, and I find it to be quite helpful and useful, so much so that we devoted an entire chapter of it where we have almost thirty different mechanisms to be able to measure how we are learning, how we are influencing and gaining those rewards in the organization as a result of adopting and using social tools and working in social ways.

Connie: That makes sense. Before we wrap up I wanted to ask you one more question, because I know sometimes there are listeners who feel frustrated, they're trying to develop and push some kind of social media within the company internally or they're trying to make it more of a learning organization. What do you think the path is to creating this type of culture?

Marcia: I'm often asked if it requires a top-down approach. In those sorts of examples people often say our senior leaders aren't really participating, and therefore this is never going to work. And what I find in my work with many, many organization, I find it's about 50/50, that about half the organizations there has been an uptake and wider adoption because their culture is one where if the senior leaders aren't working in different sorts of ways then no one else thinks that that's important and they don't do it.

But I've also seen in just as many organizations there to be a ground swell of support where one or two or parts of the organization have started working in these sorts of ways, and that has spread like wildfire through the organization because people have seen value and they relax a little bit because for the first time in their career they have an opportunity to be able to connect and work in ways that feel natural and healthy and sensible to them. But both of those require a working out loud as their path. And so that's why I'm answering the question in this way, is that either the senior leaders or the people who are on the ground working in different sorts of ways they have to be sharing that, they have to be talking about what they're doing, not just sharing information. So there has to be a modeling on some level of pointing out-- I've seen examples where senior leaders say, "I attended this meeting and here's what I learned," or, "I read this fact and I didn't know that before," and will share that. And so they're talking, I guess we could also use the jargon, say at a meta level about what they're doing and not just the work itself, because sometimes that can go very easily unnoticed. But for there to be that sort of shift, there's the active, intentional act of letting people in on what it is that they're doing and how it's benefiting them. And what I find when I hear people say that it's not being adopted or my efforts are not going viral, it's often because they're just doing the work and they're not actually talking about what's helping and how this is benefiting them and how they're saving time.

One of the most common objections I hear from people is I don't have time for this, I have meetings all day, I've got so much email, I can't also be expected to be learning from people across the world and my company. And I point out — hopefully as gingerly or as tenderly as I possibly can — that if that's the case you're probably doing it wrong. And you have an opportunity to replace some of those time wasting and silly practices with better ones that are easier to do, and less time consuming and focus on replacing some of those old, outdated practices at an organizational level, at a team level, on an individual level, with these tools, and you will discover that you're getting you time back. And then who doesn't want that, I haven't met anybody in years who couldn't use a little bit more time in their day. So that's really no just the key — I'm not going to say steps in a lockstep way, because it really does vary by organization, but to be explicit about what people are doing so they can actually see it and they can learn from it along the way, both in an ambient way as well as an intentional way. And then also focus on replacing some of that stuff that should have gone away a long time ago: sunset it, do it in relationship oriented ways and social ways and people will think here's twelve other things I wish I could get rid of and it's time to start letting those go.

Connie: I think that advice will probably help some people feel more optimistic, particularly that whole meta thing of working out loud and letting people know what you've been doing and what benefits you get from it. Thank you so much, Marcia, for giving us your time and all of your knowledge about social learning.

Marcia: I'm happy to do that. I also always want to point out that I am an active, avid learner, and so I'm available on social media and I hope that the conversation can continue outside of this podcast with both people who are listening and who have questions I am happy to always answer those question and to be able to work out loud, to live out loud as best as I can so we all can get to doing the things that matter most to us, instead of what sometimes seems as dealing with all those objections that have kept us from doing what's right.

Connie: That's great. I will put your Twitter handle in the show notes and any other ways to keep the conversation going.

Marcia: Sounds great.

I hope you enjoyed this conversation and that it broadened your perspective on social learning. You can find the show notes at thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/29. And if you are seeing the impact of social learning in your work or if you're finding new ways to

connect, share and collaborate, please let us know about your experiences in the comments sections. Thanks for listening, and I'll to you next time. Take care.