Transcript for S12 E3 Learning how to learn, unlearn and relearn with Beth Salyers

Cathryn Barnard (00:42)

Hello and welcome to a fresh episode of the Future of Internal Communication podcast. I'm Cat Barnard joined as ever by Jen Sproul and Dominic Waters. Slightly different topic today, but one that I think concerns all of us, not singularly internal communicators, but actually everybody at work. We want to talk about continuous learning and the need for us all to embrace learning in the flow of work. I think it's an understatement to say that most operating environments have been massively transformed or impacted by new digital tools in the last few years. There are a few places that I can think of where one's daily work wouldn't have been impacted by the onslaught of new tools, but not many.

And so what I really want this conversation today to explore is how we adjust our mindsets away from waiting to be told what training we will be able to access in the coming year towards every day being a learning day and how we can embrace curiosity and expansive thinking in the flow of our work. So without further ado, I want to introduce you to today's guest, Beth Salyers, who's talking to us from the US. And interestingly, Beth and I met online, I think maybe four or five years ago now, at a online learning event that was organised by Seth Godin. So that is the riff that we actually came to know one another in an orchestrated learning programme. Beth has a PhD in education. She is a former public school classroom teacher and currently works as a learning experience designer for social impact organisations, non-profits, for-profits and schools and universities in the US through her business, custom learning, atelier. So we have off line had many a conversation about how human beings are actually hardwired for learning and how I guess a hundred years of very sort of process oriented industrialised thinking has kind of led us to believe that learning happens at school. And then if we're lucky, our employers may occasionally invest in some upskilling for us in our workplaces and then we'll retire. And that's where we just focus on leisure. And I think that's a bit of a false reality. And so I'm really hoping that today we're going to have a conversation that kind of reboots how we think about learning in our work and also in our lives. So Beth, thank you for joining us, sorry, all the way from New Orleans in America.

Beth Salyers (03:49)

Thank you so much for having me. I wish I was there with y'all.

Cathryn Barnard (03:52)

I'm not sure about that. We just had a little conversation about the weather before we came on air and I think ours is greyer than yours. But we would love to have you obviously were it not for our weather. I would like to kick off with maybe a meta question when we think about learning and education. Given what I just said about this very kind of traditional construct of learning happening at school, work happening at work and leisure happening in retirement. What is the number one thing that you think people tend to misunderstand about learning and education?

Beth Salyers (04:31)

Thank you for asking that question. I think most people jump into content or something else, but I think that it's really important to realise that one is that I think that organisations as a whole systems get trapped into silos when they're only focusing on pushing content. And I will probably age me because this is the game I'm going to reference, but it's kind of like a content Tetris, right? So you feel like you're getting all the blocks coming to you and all of sudden you miss one and it just tumbles down on top of you and then we have the overwhelm, we have the burnout, which is a big topic in the future of work. The other thing that I don't think that we talk about explicitly enough is that the system is working exactly as it was designed to work. And that the fact that you think about learning and quote unquote education or curriculum instruction in school, in the schoolhouse with homework and teachers and exams and et cetera, is by design because it was created during an industrial time where we needed to prepare workers. And so the format of traditional schooling, at least in the United States and most of Western Europe at least, is that factory mindset. You go through layers. You're the thing off Pink Floyd's The Wall, the video of the kids on the conveyor belt, you're literally going through primary, secondary, tertiary to go get a job. And so if you look at it that way, it makes sense that then you have recess and you go play, and then you have after school and you go play, and you have the weekends that you go play. But we never really talk about all these other places that learning naturally happens.

One, because of curiosity and two, like you said earlier, just because of survival. We're learning all the time. First and foremost, our brain is meant to keep us alive. So our first learning in any new situation is, is this a threat or is this safe?

Cathryn Barnard (06:14)

Well first of all please may I just say I love the fact that you've brought any music into this podcast and I'm going to embarrass myself here when when did that song come out when did that truck come out it's probably the 70s, Dom I'm referring to you.

Dom (06:28)

I think the single in the UK came out in 78 and it was the film a couple years later. We don't need education.

Cathryn Barnard (06:35.)

I love the fact that you know that.

Jen Sproul (06:37)

78, brilliant year, year of my birth, best year.

Beth Salyers (06:40)

Same Jen, same Jen.

Dom (06:44)

I was already listening to Pink Floyd, then that shows how old I am.

Cathryn Barnard (06:49)

Well, we don't like to dwell on that too much, Dom, but what I'm thinking about is, that's 46 years ago, am I right?

Jen Sproul (06:57)

That's my age so yes that would be right yeah I'll be 47 this year.

Cathryn Barnard (07:01)

So ostensibly, as a cultural artefact, Pink Floyd have been singing slash discussing the brokenness of the education system for almost 50 years. That's kind of where I would go to with that. And it's very, to your point, when you think about education and workplace learning, how institutionalised that is just entrenched in institutionalisation, isn't it?

Beth Salyers (07:34)

Absolutely by design. And also the first one you all put out this year, kind of a recap of last year and whatnot, the podcast, and it a lot of about uncertainty, for obvious reasons. But I think that's one of the reasons why it's institutionalised. I think we often confuse uncertainty with unfamiliarity and uncomfortableness.

If we're institutionalised into this is school, this is learning, this is professional development, this is continuing education, whatever label you want to slap on it, is that if we're institutionalised to say this is valid and this is invalid, or this is good and this is bad, that means even if something in a learning situation is designed or you're approaching, if it doesn't fit into your schema that you are used to, even if you love the people, even if you love the topic, your brain at first is gonna go, is this safe? That feels different. So all of a you have that bursting cortisol and no one's learning with a burst of cortisol going through their system. And so it takes a lot of time to do that unlearning, to get that little steps of increasing what is familiar and then how do you train yourself to be less reactive when you might experience uncomfortability.

And I think those are elements of learning design that most folks skip over for a variety of reasons.

Cathryn Barnard (08:55)

But it also makes me think about the way that we show up at work. We know, because the data is out there, we have dreadful, dreadful issues with global engagement. The UK, as an example, we are lagging 33rd place out of 38 European countries for engagement. I think our engagement is around about 10%. So we're properly circling the drain. But we operate in a wider culture of perfectionism where it seems to me to be the case that we are putting undue pressure on ourselves all the time to show up and appear competent, knowledgeable, expert in our tiny, in our niche, whatever that is. And therefore it's anathema, isn't it? It's completely counterintuitive that we might go into a learning setting and acknowledge that we feel out of our depth, that we don't know because we have been conditioned that our workplace value somehow syncs up with is directly proportional to what we know. And yet our external environments are now in such disarray, we have no ability to predict what the environment is gonna do next week, what geopolitical frictions will have on economics. There's nothing really stable, is there? But we still obsess over needing to appear competent as if our lives depend on it. And it's a really unproductive way of showing up, I'd say, when I really think about it.

Beth Salyers (10:52)

And I think we're, this is not ever untrue, but it feels very pertinent right now. We can't afford to be exhausted, and unfortunately we're exhausted. And for me what comes up is that we have to pay attention to the role of learning and being in uncertainty and identity and belonging. Because again, back to brain science, this is you're not going to change it, right? This is how the brain was evolved to work. We hang on to our identity because it makes us feel safe. And if we encounter something that challenges that, we go into shutdown mode. There's room for working on what is the identity that I take into this. And can you, as a learning designer, I look at it as how do we create spaces and experiences where someone might be able to practise putting down their identity, not in a way that is invalidating it, but just holding it in like, this is how I'm coming into this room, but I'm open and I feel supported and safe to kind of play around with it. And I think for me, I did a lot of work earlier on in my career on like teacher identity and I was a classroom teacher. And so I remember in one of my early, early classes,

You're standing in front and when you're coming out of school as a teacher at 22, you're not that much older than the students, right? And so you have all these identity things. You're like, do they take me seriously? And I student taught in high school, so they were only like three years younger than me, four or five. And so it was one of those things. And the professor that I had reminded us, they said students, which I think goes for most people on the planet. People know when you're not confident and they know when you're lying, especially young folks.

Beth Salyers (12:36)

And so it is better to practise in your student teaching saying, I don't know, but that's a great question. Let's figure it out. As a part that just rolls off your tongue as a go-to statement, as opposed to a student asks you a question, a team member asks you a question, a colleague asks you a question, your boss asks you a question, and you're like, well, my identity is wrapped around, I'm competent. I got this job, so I must belong here. I want to keep my job. I like whatever that is.

is how do we help folks practise coming and bringing into their identities idea of I want to be seen as a curious person. I want to be seen as someone who is open, someone who is trustworthy, someone who wants to make other people feel comfortable if they don't know something. I think that can also be like, of course I want to make people feel comfortable. But do you exhibit that? Do you show vulnerability?

And so all these things, is very complex but interconnected things go into how we learn or don't learn or unlearn or relearn in any given situation. I think that's the other element that people are learning coming into your Zoom room. They're learning when they come into your office. They're learning when they open up your LinkedIn page because we are constantly taking that information in and going, I like that. I don't like that. I feel safe. I don't feel safe. There's someone I know. That's fantastic.

Oh my gosh, am I prepared? It's when you walk into a class and you thought you were just gonna be able sit there and take notes, but it's all formed in a circle and you're like, oh no, we're dialoguing. All of a sudden, that learning experience, that learning design shifts how someone enters that room. And unfortunately, I think most organisations go into it saying, here's our PowerPoint, we have so much content, let's roll. And there's a big disconnect.

Jen Sproul (14:26)

I think safety is a really important word. I think someone should feel safe at work, should feel safe in their environment, because whether that's personally or professionally, because when you feel safe to express a concern, a question, and we often say it's okay to make mistakes, that's not just okay to learn, okay? And that is a part of the process, but we give it that that terminology and there's a lot of talk and chatter about imposter syndrome and we all have it. So I sometimes wonder if that plugs the idea in our head before we've even approached something to say we are an imposter and it's that kind of connotation that that phraseology brings in rather than, we're just curious or we can be capable, we're already planting our doubt in our minds before we enter that environment. That's just, as you were talking, one of my reflections as well.

But I think one of the things as well that I wanted to pick up on was this question of design. So if you take at the moment what's going on, I've seen a lot of conversation around the need to transform HR and there's a lot of need to, and if I look at what employees are saying and where they want to feel more, they want to know where's my progress, how do I get to this kind of ladder, tetris to get to the top.

How are you going to put that in front of me? How are you going to, you should deliver this to me because you should be putting that forward. And it's all very, how can we create something that I think is so much more linear and vector and fluid fit into something that should be so squares and sort of paths and graphs. It's that kind of thing. It's like change management is more than a Gantt chart. It's very, there is that fluidity that needs to be doing it. So where do you think that, I guess where I'm going with this design and mindset that need to meet. How do we transform to get design of learning and the way we help people progress and we help them bring that, assuming that that environment is one of safety to one that then matches with that sort of, that sense of progression and policy and process because that's where I think sometimes is it square peg or a hole? We just

can't find the matches? Is that one of where we're getting it? Where do we think we're getting it wrong and why do we do it this? Why do we think like this and how do we change that?

Beth Salyers (16:37)

I think it's exactly that. It drives me nuts when I hear anyone, leaders think about, we want innovation, want creativity, we want co-creation, we want all these big, gorgeous, fun words. But when we look at the science behind creativity and co-creation cat and innovation and those things, you need uncertainty. You need time and space to fail. You need safe places to do that. You need the resources, you need to practice.

And I think the thing we don't talk about in that and how do you like we have this what we claim we want and then we are still continually trying with the same techniques over and over because identity it makes us feel safe. I know how to do a PowerPoint and stand up in front of a room. Easy peasy. We've all been doing it for years, right? We know how to take a test. We know how to do these things and so we fall back because we ourselves are scared if we're leading learning, most teachers teach how they were taught. And we're not even conscious about that. And then we have to break that down and then try to do it differently. And so what I often talk to folks is that how much are the participants involved in this? Because I think the thing we're not talking about is the role of trust. If you look at the performing arts, if you look at sports, we have metrics all over the place, especially for sports, right? But if there is a batter who is playing baseball and they hit, they know if they hit the sweet spot. They don't need external numbers for that. If a performer gets off the stage, they know if they had a fabulous night. They don't need the review the next day. They feel it internally. And I don't think we trust the learners and the participants in learning enough to say, what are you feeling? What do you understand? Did you feel like you grew there? Did you feel like you were supported in that experience? And how will you know? How will you know that you have gained competency on this topic? How will you know if you're gonna be able to apply what you've learned with your colleagues? How will you know? And so that dialogue and that co-creation of what it means to find success is I think a place we can start because all the resources exist for that to happen at this point.

Jen Sproul (18:53)

So it's the conversation around how we think about the mindset that is needed to help us have that sense of how we learn and how we go around that as opposed to trying to go, well, if I design this sort of rhythmic process and these scores, that's going to do it. Let's not think almost at the design point. Let's think about the conversation and the mindset as the start point.

Beth Salyers (19:13)

Right, and I would say that is the most important design concept of you can't teach anyone if you don't know them. You have to meet them where they are. And if you don't know where they are and you don't trust and believe them when they tell you where they are, I don't think in the long term it personally, it professionally matters how many modules and certificates and whatnot. But that

also goes back to the leader and what someone wants to get out of said learning experience. If you want to be a dictator and have people come into your factory and nail things together and ship them out, you know what? That's pretty straightforward. If you're working with folks who are in a knowledge based economy, if they are in internal comms, if they're doing people-ing work, you have to trust people and trusting people can be real scary. And so I think some of that unlearning for those in leadership is how do you practise trusting people around you and opening up to the possibility that you might not know where you're going to end up.

Dom (20:15)

Beth, I'd be really interested to find out how you go about making the case for continuous learning because everything you said makes great sense. But I guess playing devil's advocate for a moment go back to what you were just saying if you're in charge of a factory and your ultimate goal is just to get stuff made and nailed together, how do you persuade someone like that that they should be encouraging their workforce their colleagues to even think about continuous learning and then provide the resources for it. So I guess the question is how important is continuous learning going to be when it comes to the future of work and how can we make that case to people who make the decisions.

Beth Salyers (20.52)

That is the key question. And I usually go back to, again, identity. What kind of leader and worker and human do you want to be on this planet? And if you come back to me with, I want to be creative and bold and caring and human-centered, and if you use those sort of words, then we can talk about, well, tell me how you do that.

How does that show up in your work? Point to the activities you do that are creative. Point to the activities that you do with your colleagues that are human centered. And if you can knock a whole bunch of them out, fantastic. I think we all have room to improve on all those, because we're conditioned differently, right? But what kind of person do you want to be? And it sounds a little woo, it sounds a little out there, it sounds a little qualitative and a very much algorithmic quantitative world that we seem to inhabit. And it's going to be uncomfortable. Ask yourself those questions and hear your own answer and then do something with it. And I think that nuance that when people are like, let's go ahead and just be like this, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa, whoa. There's a learning mechanism in there of learning how to be. So people can't just step into this new, oh, I'm going to go into 2025 having these open, honest conversations, creating a safe space, and we're just gonna co-create all year. I really hope you can, but we have to really break down all the different mechanisms that go into these specific people in this specific context to get to the nuance that matters there. And I think that's the problem with, a lot of people, we're in a fast ROI, next day prime, element here. They wanna cut and paste and like, it worked for me. But that's the fun, nerdy, scary, cool thing about learning is that it is so incredibly nuanced in context, intimately matters. And it matters how we learn, what we learn, how we apply, and how we integrate that learning.

Dom (2)

It's interesting, one of the common themes in the recent conversations on the podcast has been, I'm paraphrasing really, lots of organisations have or claim to have great values or great aspirations about being good corporate citizens. But that ends at finding the words. And those words are communicated in some way or other. The traditional moan is it's a post on the wall, but it could be anyway. And it's interesting what you're saying, because it sounds like where organisations can fall down is they don't spend the time in saying, OK, how do we do this? How does this look in your day-to-day work? What opportunities do you have to demonstrate this particular value or make sure that we're contributing to society in this particular way? So that's a corporate side. It'd be also interesting to understand a bit about the conversations you have with the people you want to learn or the people who need to learn because we do a lot of training. We know that some people who come on training are very open. Some of them aren't so open. And it'd be interesting. Bit of a hack for me really if nothing else but it'd be interesting to know some of the conversations and the questions you have with reluctant learners. Let's put it that way.

Beth Salyers (24:00)

I'm so glad you asked this is my favourite hack period. I actually start with this with anyone who says I want to learn X or I want to teach X so it works both ways is I ask people four questions. I Ask them how do they want to feel? What do they want to think? What do they want to know how to do? And what do they want to know?

I always start with how you want to feel is first, then the other three, depending on how the conversation goes. And it turns out that that seems to be the hardest thing I ever ask anyone. Because when you break it down, that's really hard to answer. I don't want a dissertation. I don't want a paragraph. I want a phrase. I don't even need a complete sentence.

Beth Salyers (24:44)

It's an eye into how the brain works and how we are all just trying to find our way through all this is that when someone goes, how do you want to feel? Well, I want to feel safe and happy and ambitious and competent and successful. Oh, no, no, no, no, no. First of all, that's what does that mean? You want to feel like how do you actually want to feel? And we take it down to a very specific feeling. Most people actually come back like I want to feel safe. I want to feel heard. I want to feel important. And then you go through and you go like, well, what do you want to think? What do you want to think about? Oh, I want to think about GenAI in the workplace. Fantastic. So does everyone else. What about it specifically in five words? Can you actually and so that process alone is actually starting to help us unlearn and relearn our relationship to the topic in the first place.

I position it as, hey, we're just getting to know each other. Let's see which direction we'll go. But that itself is a learning process of how do you start to understand how your own mind is working, and what do you know about yourself, and what you need for this to be successful.

Dom (25:57)

I guess what you're doing there is establishing a common agenda, a shared agenda, rather than traditionally. And I know I've done this in the early days of training. I go in thinking, I've got to force this stuff into your head. And some people say, OK, most people say get lost. Whereas I suppose if you could say, here's what you need, here's what you said you want, and here's how what we have to talk about can help you do that, you've got a common ground. Yeah, I love it. Thank you for that. I've written those down. I'll try it out.

Beth Salyers (26:25)

Please let me know how it goes. I taught seventh grade English language arts in the United States. I was tasked with teaching boring ass grammar. Like talk about having to work hard to meet 12 year olds and 13 year olds of why they need to know, what a noun and a verb is.

It's one of those things you're like, you have to meet people where they are. Cool. That makes a great bumper sticker. But how do you actually do that? How do you do that humanely? How do you do that with respect? How do you do that safely? And I found that those four questions, those four prompts help us get to a place that usually always benefits everyone involved.

Dom (27:03)

I will pass over to Cat but it's interesting because we do a lot of training around communication. And I think that is a fantastic, because if you go in to say to someone, we're going to train you to be a better communicator, they're going to say, get stuffed again. Because no one likes to be criticised for being a bad communicator. And everyone thinks they can do it. But when you start to say, you've got an issue in terms of people not taking on board what you have to say, or your issue is that people aren't following health and safety regulations and making that sort of connection, then they're much more open to finding ways of doing it. So yeah. I think we can apply that to some of work that internal communicators have to do as well.

Cathryn Barnard (27:34)

It's fascinating, isn't it though? Because, it begs the question why any of us turn up to be taught anything because obviously school is kind of a legal matter. If you don't go to school, your parents, I know what it's like in the US, but in the UK, if you don't go to school, your parents get fined technically. Like there are societal penalties for non-attendance. How you show up psycho-emotionally once you are inside the educational setting is another kettle of fish. You may be biddable, responsive, malleable, receptive, all of those things, or you may be at the completely different end of the spectrum, which is that you're disengaged, you're disruptive, you're problematic, you are resistant, avoidant, all of those things. What I've understood you to say, is that you're actually inquiring of an individual why they're sat in the chair. And for me, when I think about conventional workplace learning, I welcome an opportunity to have a conversation about this, I hope I don't offend some more traditional workplace L &D execs, but it seems to me, and I remember having this conversation with somebody who was one of the first guests on this podcast, who I know

you know, Beth, Paul Jocelyn. And he used to work for one of the big supermarkets here in the UK, bringing their learning programmes to life. And he said, what you need to understand is that a lot of organisations up until now have used training to scale efficiency. Everybody that performs this function is trained to this level of doing.

But what I've heard you say just there is when you invite the learner to become curious about why they're there, that is a completely different ballpark because most people would turn up to training. And I don't know whether you would agree or disagree with this, Dom, but I see people, they turn up to training because they've got budget to spend. They've got a spare budget for their training budget or because so-and-so has told them that they need to go on a course. But how much of that is bona fide genuine curiosity? What you've planted there is a completely different way of seeing something or thinking about something.

Dom (29:58)

I'm just gonna reinforce what you said there. We do a lot of training with leaders around communication. And to be frank, much as I'd love to say the opposite, it's incredibly rare that anybody comes in the training room going, whoa, I've been looking forward to this for months. Fantastic. No one does that because most people don't wanna be there. So I think you're just echoing your point actually, that we don't see many people who are looking forward to having a learning experience, sadly. Maybe in future we will, now we've taken some of Beth's advice, but not at the moment anyway.

Beth Salyers (30:27)

Well, that makes sense because that's part of meeting people where they are. No matter your age, you have a connotation when someone says learning, like an image comes to your head. If I don't like carrots. So when someone says, there's carrots in it, like I automatically go, because I don't have a good experience with them. People do that for lecture based learning. People do that for field trips. People feel do that for entering into a institutional building. And so we have to meet people where they are. It's that nuance of it does matter someone's historical experience with teaching and learning. Whether it be grade school, whether it be tertiary, whether it be professional learning, whether it be the jazz class they take on Saturday afternoons with their friends. These are all learning environments that form someone's disposition when they enter a space, especially if it's deemed learning, right? If it's a formal training, right? And they haven't self-opted in.

Beth Salyers (31:23)

Knowing that someone is here for compulsory reasons is hugely important for the trainer or for the leader. It's not bad or good and that's part of our work as learning designers to not have a, they don't want to be here. So who cares? I care, but I'm not going to judge it. I've been to many of trainings and I'm a learning nerd. I didn't want to be there, but that's stuff you can use. And I think that that's turning it into like anything that a learner tells you, even if their disposition coming into a training room, a traditional training room, that's data. And I think that that's for learning designers to be trained on themselves and to sit back in their own identity, right, of how are you going to meet people where they are if immediately you're like, they're not even acting like they want to be here,

so I'm gonna check out too. Well, you've just failed the situation, in my opinion, and I think that that, it's tough because everyone loves metrics for all the reasons, and we need them. But so many metrics are surface level, and they're helpful. But and if everything has to be into a predetermined metric, then you, by definition, are not going to have any big wows, exploratory creativity, or innovations. And I think balancing those two things that can be true at the same time is the real need.

Cathryn Barnard (32:47)

So actually what you've got me thinking about, which I've never really thought about before, and excuse me listeners, because this is my brain processing in real time, but what you've got me thinking about is that the essence or maybe an essence of successful learning is curiosity and the four questions that you posed to ignite the inquiry of why am I here?

Why am I here? If I am a creature of free will, why am I in this room right now being asked these four questions? And if we can create environments for one another where we encourage and invite curiosity. That is a massive step forward, particularly in terms of long-term organisational sustainability, the ability of the organisation to sustain itself over time, because curiosity hopefully fosters innovation, fresh thinking, new ideas, new perspectives, new ways of being, doing, et cetera, et cetera, new ways of serving stakeholders. So that's kind of one side of it is there's an imperative to shake up how the learner feels about learning. Side one. And then institutionally, there's this other big piece which needs a total shakedown and I'm going to quote here because ever since I read this, it's just stuck in my mind. So there's a wonderful gentleman called John Hagel who, before he retired, led Deloitte's Center for the Edge and he wrote we cannot codify and transfer predetermined skills and existing knowledge fast enough to match the rates of change in industry. The pace of change in industry is happening so quickly, we cannot get ahead of it to write a training programme. And I think that is a really poignant little quote to remember because it kind of turns everything on its head. From your perspective as a learning designer, what would you say in response to that? What would you add to it?

Beth Salyers (35:07)

I'm so glad that you brought this into the conversation when you said this to me earlier. Well, before I come out on that, think that that what you were talking about before, there is no shortage of curiosity on the planet. And people know how to do their career. If we didn't have curiosity, Google, TikTok, et cetera, would not exist. We are curious humans. And it's that element of being able somehow we come into a professional formal experience and ooh right? We just shut down for all variety of reasons and I think that there's an issue of trust there and there's an issue of control and getting to John Hagel's quote you can say that that is true but there is a difference between saying that that is true and actually believing it and actually acting upon it and I think that that's the same with a lot of folks who are not honest with their objectives. You had said earlier, if someone want, if their true objective is to train people to be more efficient, I have no problem with that, but be honest about it. Don't come in and say, we're gonna train you to be creative and work together and coexist, but the training clearly shows that your priority is efficiency and shutting up and doing what you're supposed to. That is what enrages me. And so when you look at John Hagel's quote, it's

factual. Can anyone on the planet or even GenAI codify and transfer predetermined skills and existing knowledge fast enough to meet the change of rates in industry? Absolutely not. However, what I see is a whole bunch of people saying, oh my God, that's so true. Let me try. Let me try with this training programme. Let me try with these metrics. Let me try with this module. Let me try with this experience.

And that's, you know, people hit upon it. We make inroads, right? There's some ah-has in there. But I think it's really more interesting what after I looked up the whole quote and what he says after is the most important phrase here is that skills and existing knowledge. And this whole quote I think turns us on to the idea that we can do everything we need to do with skills that are nameable and with pre-existing knowledge.

Beth Salyers (37:27)

And he proposes a focus on capabilities rather than skills. And I know there's a big debate between skills and capabilities and there are pros and cons. And I'm usually a person that y'all depends on the context and the people, whether you go skill-based or capabilities-based, but claiming one is forever better than the other seems a little presumptuous because it doesn't incorporate that context in that nuance. So like personally and professionally, I think it centres the measurement of learning as opposed to actual learning. And the capabilities as I looked it up in Deloitte Center for the Edge defines enduring human capabilities as observable human attributes that are demonstrated independent of context. So if I agree with the first sentence he said or was shared, and then I look at what they mean and read on and I go to what they mean by capabilities and is defined as observable human attributes that are demonstrated independent of context. As a learning designer with a PhD in instruction and curriculum, I have issue with this because independent of context throws red flags up for me. Because independent of context means who are you teaching? What is their purpose of learning this? How are they going to bring this into their lives. Do you care how they feel? Do you care what they think? Do you care what they're able to do? So for me, I wrestled with this quote that you sent a lot because I think, yeah, it's factually true. But if you dig into it, I think it could also lead us down another siloed path of do it this way, not this way. I'm a new expert with Has The Way, and I'll brand it and sell it to you at, you know, 9.97. So that's my little rant of frustration when people have got a solution.

Cathryn Barnard (39:16)

When my needle got stuck in that whole thing and it's fascinating to hear that. The bit that I'm now stuck on is existing knowledge. I'm like, do we need more existing knowledge or do we need fresh ideas? Because what is that thing that Einstein said? Einstein said we cannot solve the problems that we have with the same mindset that we had when we created them or something like that. That's a terrible, terrible riff. But the point being we need new ideas, don't we? We need new knowledge, fresh knowledge, fresh insights.

Beth Salyers (39:55)

Which means we also need new metrics because if most metrics are now defined as predetermined or thus codified, then how are you going to measure something that is yet exists? And so if you say you want innovation, but you're measuring it by metrics that are codified, for me, that's antithetical from a linguistics perspective and from a practice perspective.

Jen Sproul (40;22)

I think I need a minute to process all this myself, you know? But also the thing you talked about with skills and capability and competence, look, we run an institution. So what we're doing as IoIC is trying to set a standard of practice fundamentally. It's more nuanced in communication where we also have behavioural attributes that will help you to be of a standard of practice, which means that you are curious, that you challenge, that you think about things as well as, if you're doing an activity, should, going back to fundamentally writing, you should put a comma in the right place. I'm still learning that myself. Those things are all in there. And by that, it helps us know what good looks like and where we're trying to get to, et cetera, et cetera. But with all that being said and I think it is the piece for me as well around existing knowledge and there was the word as well, observable, which I thought was quite strange. What does observable mean? I mean, I see you in a room tapping away at the right speed or you observe to, I don't know, I find that quite a strange thing to try and do, but it kind of leads me to my next, I guess, topic or question. When we're thinking about observable as the word. We talk a lot about how learning by osmosis, learning by observation, by learning by being around others. There's many things I learned in my junior career when you sit as a junior and you hear how someone handles a phone conversation and how they deal with a tricky situation and you go, okay, and you don't realize, or you just sit in a meeting and see how people behave and you get that judgment in your mind, you may not express it about whether you felt they handled it correctly, incorrectly, so on, so forth. And so there is that comes out of, I guess, learning programmes, modular outcome approach to being that social learning aspect. And there is a lot of this debate isn't going anywhere. It seems to rear its head again this year as well about we all need to get back to the office five days a week because we need to collaborate and therefore you become observable or osmosis-able. But learning is social, right? So I guess my question is, why is learning social? And how do we create the conditions to enable good social learning?

Beth Salyers (42:44)

Excellent question and I I love how you brought up again the observable fact. I Think that's a great catch-all word but doesn't really mean anything and I think in response to that when folks are like well, I need to observe people in the office. I always come back with how do you know, how will you know if someone's doing a good job? How will you know if they understand and people usually, it'll be observable. What will be observable? Who will be doing what? Where, when, and how? And if you can't fill in those things, then we're just kind of keeping the ball rolling with no real direction, right? It looks good. We can do our check marks on our checklist of we, they're in their seat. They've, you know, someone who puts a little thing on their keyboard, because it makes it look like they're typing away at ungodly speeds, right?

So all these metrics are set. But if you start looking at observing folks, it connects directly to why learning is social because that is the first and foremost way that any human learns. Right? You learn you're born. You learn from the caretakers. You learn from growing up and watching TV. You learn from seeing people on your block. You learn from and you're continually learning. Right? We can't help it.

That's what we're made to do is going, how are they doing that? How are they doing that? Do I like that? Do I not like that? How does that make me feel? Unconsciously, we're doing that. And so the idea that learning isn't social would suppose that it happens in a vacuum, and that's just bonkers. That assumes that you are a blank slate coming into whatever environment you are, and that is disregarding your history that's disregarding your experiences that's disregarding your fears and interests that's disregarding the social circles your identity it's disregarding so much and another thing I think is going to come up a lot in in these times is that all to me shows lack of empathy. Like if you're going that route that's really not very empathetic that you don't care how someone's entering a room and how they're going to learn from their Zoom mates or their cubicle mates or their peers. And so the idea that learning at work is not also social. I think would be maybe a ditch effort to weasel out of having to be responsible for it. It's easy and it's kind of then okay to be like, that's not our problem. We're not here to make friends. Even in school, you're like, don't copy. Don't do peer work in the United States.

You to have to put like folders around because teachers would be like, don't copy off of people and they would instruct you to build like little forts to keep your work here and your peers work here. And so what is that teaching? Right? That's not collaborative. So we have all these folks who are like, let's teach collaboration, but do this work on your own and turn it in. And you're like, that's bonkers. And also that learning is social. And so the idea that you would have to always come into the office to be social and to be learning is insane. If we didn't have the internet, I could see that, but we do. I'm talking to y'all and we are thousands and thousands of miles away from each other, but I've learned something about each of you as soon as I came into this virtual room. It's a red flag for me when people start to discount the context in which folks exist in. I question if they're truly honest about their objectives and what they're trying to do.

Jen Sproul (46:26)

And I think that that piece for me as well around that is are we trying to rebrand social learning as collaboration, but then not create the environment for actually really what is social learning if we just put it down to that. But if we build up this message that we need to collaborate more than that makes everything we do okay because we haven't been honest about the objective of what we're trying to do.

Beth Salyers (46:44)

Right. It comes back to those are those are sexy words right now. Co-create, collaboration, empathy all these things and we all can point to a vast number of examples where someone said something and they do something else right and that in that dissonance that that creates I think is why people are burning out or contributes to why people are burning out why people don't want to go into the office why people are struggling with values not matching actions in their own personal life and for

their employers or their colleagues. And I think that, we're hiding under the umbrella of sexy words because they get clicks on the internet and it makes us sound smart. Back to that identity thing. It makes us sound part of the conversation if I have these key words. SEO literally is part of our identity shifting. But when we talk about learning is social, all of you're like, science?

Cathryn Barnard (47:41)

One of the things that occurs to me constantly as we collectively attempt to navigate the future of work and bring these conversations to life and help the internal communication community understand risk and opportunity and all of those things. One of the things that I keep thinking about and this conversation has reinforced it is that we had this opportunity, I think we did have an opportunity for a small window of time when we all got locked down in situ. There was a golden opportunity to just take a massive pause and then kind of check in with ourselves, whoever our organisational communities consisted of to say, to sit down and wholeheartedly reagree our terms of reference. And I know that Dom and I, we've talked about, a glossary of terms. When we use this word here, what do we actually mean? What is our shared meaning? And this conversation has really brought it home to me because at A level, I understood that continuous learning needs to be part of the fixtures and fittings of the future of work, right? So continuous learning, we all need to continuously learn, evolve, adapt, blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. But until this conversation and I feel like all the conversations that we've had so far this year on the podcast have been a bit mind blowing because I feel like each and every one of them is to some degree breaking down the structures of what we thought we knew and offering or inviting us maybe to think about new ways of thinking about things. And, and I think this is totally within the communicators sweet spot because who else to contemplate or deliberate or invite inquiry on the meaning of words than an internal communicator? I know that is properly going down a philosophical rabbit hole and I will hand over to you Dom now to add your thoughts in, but that's what I'm thinking about right now.

Dom (50:00)

Yes, yes, but I think it's a philosophical rabbit hole down which we won't go now because I'm conscious of time. I think one of the key principles of learning is not to give people too much to take on board. So I think we need to come into land. But to do that, one of the things we're trying to do, I guess, with these podcasts is to help internal communication professionals have better impact in their organisations, have better conversations.

And so I guess there'll be some internal communication people who've listened to what has been a fantastic conversation saying, that's great, but what do I do in my job as an internal communicator to help people learn better, to help the organisations be a learning organisation? So Beth, I'm going to ask you a very difficult question. I'm really sorry about this, but given all the things we've spoken about, what's one key thing that as an internal communication professional, a practitioner listening to this, you would like me to take away?

Beth Salyers (50:53)

For internal communication professionals, I want to say remember that we are always continually learning. You don't have to do anything to go to continual learning. It's happening unconsciously, subconsciously, automatically. That's what our brains do. So the idea that you're gonna go to continuing ed, yeah, that's a physical movement, but we're already, we're always participating in continual learning. The question is, what sort of intention do you want to put on what is going to be happening? And I think the first place to start is with communications because communications is happening all the time, all around us, to us, at us, with us. And so the role of internal communications with the continual learning that is always happening is what intention do you want to drive people into or help people see as they are already continually learning. So what communication objectives, language, processes, situations can you help create that helps steer and guide and facilitate the human who's gonna be continuously learning? But with comms, how do we put on the markers on the road? How do we put up the signs? How do we put up the pit stops? How do we put up the spaces to get a breath and get water? How do we say, if you're interested in this turn left at the next stop sign? And I think that is where, quite honestly, L &D hasn't done a great job of reaching out and collaborating, that word again, and partnering with internal communication practitioners and experts. Because everything we do is continual learning, everything we do is communications.

Dom (52:47)

Thank you very much, Beth. I think we started by condemning the Pink Floyd sausage machine approach to communicative education. And I think you've given us a much better vision of what learning can be like and what we can do within it. So thank you very much for that.

Beth Salyers (53:00)

Thank you so much for having me in this conversation.