



# Podcast transcript

## Learning Transformers: Episode 1

### Interview with Andrew Buntine

Buntine, A. & Lou, A. (2022). *Interview on online learning* [audio file]. University of Melbourne.

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ARIS COLOGON: Learning Transformers, a podcast by the University of Melbourne on the future of online higher education. This is a space where we build bridges between industry and academia, and we explore the transformation of online professional learning that prepares learners for future job markets. In each episode, we'll hear expert perspectives on emerging trends, explore influences on learner workplace-readiness and competency, and gather insights that keep us, as expert practitioners, not just responsive, but actively impactful in the constantly evolving digital education landscape. Presented to you by the Learning Design team at the Melbourne School of Professional and Continuing Education - or MSPACE for short.

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ANDREA LOU: Welcome to Learning Transformers. I'm your host of this episode, Andrea Lou, a Learning Designer at MSPACE. Today, we have the privilege of welcoming Andrew Buntine to Learning Transformers. Andrew has over 20 years of experience in tertiary education and online learning. More specifically, he has extensive experience in strategy, management, consulting, research, teaching and learning design across the Australian vocational and higher education sectors.

Andrew is currently the Director of Education Design, Development and Delivery here at Melbourne School of Professional and Continuing Education, leading a high-performing multidisciplinary team, developing and delivering innovative education solutions for the University of Melbourne. Welcome Andrew.

So, Andrew, while online learning is nothing new to many of us since a few years ago, you've actually been doing this for quite a while, long before Covid, so definitely a pioneer in the industry. So I guess my first question might be, what brought you into the world of online learning so many years ago?

ANDREW BUNTINE: It's a good question, Andrea. I came into online learning through a couple of different directions back in about 1999 or 2000. At the time, I was tutoring and doing some research of my original discipline area which was public health, specifically around drug use amongst young people, which is my sort of focus back then. I was also trying to build up freelance journalism as a side hustle, which was great outlet for my writing passion at the time, and at that time the Australian governments rolled out a new initiative which is pretty innovative for the time, it was called flexible learning toolboxes, and they were designed to be online learning resources, well actually (chuckle) they were called online learning resources and multimedia resources, which is all very exciting, and ostensibly they were CD ROMs which was the medium of the day. You know the idea of flexible learning toolbox would be online learning resources built around different training packages within the vocational education sector.

One of the TAFEs in Melbourne was granted some money from the government to do a toolbox around alcohol and other drug use, which is one of the training packages, so they were looking for a folk who knew the discipline, knew how to write and had some conception of teaching and learning, so I thought I was a triple threat, I guess I ticked all those boxes for them. I put my name forward, and they asked me to write a unit, and I wrote a unit, and I put in a bit of an assessment strategy in there as well. They liked it and they asked me if I'd like to write another unit, so I did the same, so after I submitted my second one, they asked me if I'd like to come in and do some editing work on those units that have been written by other people. There's a lot of other people. They are discipline experts, but they hadn't done any of the assessment work that I did, so I was introduced to this strange new thing called instructional design which I just loved.

As I said a few side hustles on, on the go, but as things went, I put more and more of my efforts into instructional design and went full time in that space, and then sort of moved into project management and team leadership, and I was hooked, (chuckle). Over the years, I sort of changed roles in institutions and eventually moved more into management and strategy, but that sort of first gig and that... the opportunities and that toolbox initiatives really sort of opened my eyes to the power of what we can do with online education.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah it is definitely a fascinating area, and I guess that's what attracted us to this industry. So given your extensive experience in the industry what are the pros and cons of having a completely online course?

ANDREW BUNTINE: I think um...there's two sort of standard pros I think, which we talk about a lot. One being flexibility. It's learning that suits the learner, their other commitments, their location, their availability, that's a big one. The other one that's commonly talked about is connectivity or connectedness, and the fact that you know online allows students from learning communities across time and space, they can learn from global experts, and they can learn with global students and build up these networks, and they are really interesting experiences that other people elsewhere might be having perhaps out of their comfort zone and their region.

But the big one for me is also... I hate to say it because it gets overused, but it's the innovation. Innovation in this sense I think, I'm not necessarily talking about multimedia, I'm talking about the ability to present students with access to tools and approaches that aren't possible in the classroom, so they could be simulations, it could be truncating timelines to allow students to see the impact of interventions and actions in a much tighter timeframe than in the real world. Yeah I think it's not around the bells and whistles. It's more around the pedagogy I think when I talk about innovation.

As far as cons go, I think the biggest mistake we can make is trying to just simply replicate what we do face to face, just put our lectures online, put our presentation notes, static resources, readings. I think you're missing the opportunity there. It's... it's something we talk in our office Andrea, about the difference between conveniently online and purposely online, and I think we should always strive to be purposefully online. We should be asking ourselves what is the student doing, and if the answer to that question is they're reading something or watching something rather than that they're building something or synthesising or interacting, I think we've missed an opportunity.

ANDREA LOU: Right, so from your experience do you have an example that you could share which is a good balance between these pros and cons?

ANDREW BUNTINE: Ah.. Don't make me choose a favourite. That's hard, that's... (chuckle) but a couple of examples from previous employers and previous TAFEs that I worked with. One which I thought was fantastic. It was a 13-week role play basically, which is based around town planning, business opportunity, and environmental impact, so each student would assume the identity of the character in this role play or sometimes multiple students would assume one identity depending on the size of the cohort, and each student was provided with a dossier about this character, their motivation, their role, what they wanted to do with this business operation, or if they are on the town planning side, what cheques and balances had to be adhered to. If they are more around environmental impacts, they have their motivations from that point. We went to the point of actually giving each student fake credentials on the LMS, so they weren't logging on as Andrew or Andrea, they were logging on as Jane, or as Bob, or as Bill, and they were actually spending 13 weeks in this role play assuming that identity, and it played out as a sociological experiment rather than just a role play. It was fantastic, and the lecturer who ran it won awards both for the institution and beyond that, and he ran it well over a decade. In each time he ran it, he would tweak it slightly to incorporate new character developments which often was driven by the students themselves from previous cohorts, so that one to me was just an amazing, very low tech as well, it was online but it was very low-tech, but the online-ness of it facilitated this sort of adoption of character which I thought was fantastic.

Another one which I really liked was a simulated nursery. This is in the vocational education centre. Again we received government funding for this 'cause it was a part of innovation piece, but in this simulated nursery which was to the horticulture industry, learners had to tend to plants and then we had like three or four different species, we had to curb our ambitions because when you try to simulate the real world, the more variables you put in the bigger the project becomes, but we had like three or four plants and learners had to figure out the impacts of their interventions as far as fertilise, pot size that sort of stuff. We can show that and demonstrate that over a truncated timeline. I think well I was talking earlier about some of the pros. We could sort of model what happened over 12 weeks in this nursery in a matter of minutes, and that was really fun, it was blingy, it was bells and whistles, but it was a lot of fun to be able to do that and it was just so well received by the learners at the time.

ANDREA LOU: Thanks Andrew. Those are really good examples. Now I might be the devil's advocate here by asking a tricky question. You might have noticed that online professional learning can be quite flexible, like you said, both in terms of attendance, deadlines, as well as assessments, etc., so how do you know that someone has successfully upskilled, and how would you respond to those voices questioning the credibility of these credentials as opposed to traditional qualifications?

ANDREW BUNTINE: Oh, that is a meaty question, Andrea. I think as far as questioning the validity of credentials, I mean anything that's online, at least in our institution, I have no doubt in other institutions, it's put through the robust checks and balances that every university, as for education, in Australia, so I would turn to that as far as if there is any critiques about the validity of the qualification. I think what you are also asking there comes down to a good assessment strategy, and I think in that space online actually offers more innovation on this front. Something... you know the simulations, and case studies that I just talked about I think, the two things that you can say, well this is much more valid learning experience than sitting a three-hour exam or doing a multiple-choice test.

I think authenticity in assessment is also something that we can really do in the work that we do in online and post-professional courses. Most of our learners, dare say all of our learners are working learners. They do have current roles, they're looking at upskilling, so if we consider tie our system to that and taking advantage of the fact that most of them have workplaces, we can look at authentic learning, so that base in the workplace, facilitated online, could be role play style as one of my examples from earlier, but more tied to what learners are doing, more of benefits to their workplace. I suppose when you think of their workplace as well, some of our work is... you know we have business to business partnerships with organisations where we can really look at the impact evaluations from our learning inventions as well, so as far as back to your original question about the credibility, we can actually talk to the employees, we can talk to their HR departments, their learning development managers, or we can ensure that we're working in partnership to meet their needs.

ANDREA LOU: Yes exactly I guess a good piece of work from a student or from a learner actually speaks volume, rather than just showing them a piece of essay or some some writing or text, and this kind of work might be ready for use in the workplace, and that is actually more valuable than any other sort of written assessment also. That's the fascinating thing of professional learning and we can have a lot of possibilities when it's online.

ANDREW BUNTINE: Exactly. I think we both use the word "authentic". It's learning that's been put into action straight away, which is a value to the individual student and to the organisation and actually to communities as a whole.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah so given that we are moving more and more subjects and courses and professional learning online, what do you think tertiary education or university will be like in the future? So what will be the role of university?

ANDREW BUNTINE: Oh, that's a big question. I think you know the role of the university, the role of tertiary education as a whole, I can't see it's our mission changing dramatically, and we are a community of knowledge and learning and development, our mission is to meet the challenges of future society and community and industry, as and when they arise. I think, if you think about the individual, about how we can prepare people for their own challenges and growth. What might change is the way that we do that. We might be heading towards more personal or granular learning that meets people's circumstances and requirements.

Here at Melbourne, we're experimenting with micro credentials as are other institutions. I mean that's still an emerging beast, but I like the idea of bite sized learning that really targets particular need or a particular intervention outside of the much larger, robust and equally important award course education.

ANDREA LOU: Given that everyone might be engaging in lifelong learning nowadays, not only undergraduates or graduate students would need to learn something. Everyone, especially people in the in the workplace, might need to upskill every few years. Now that people change jobs every few years, they even change industry, we'll constantly have this need to study and to upskill, and it's not just limited to schooling or to formal undergraduate or graduate education, and we also have this need to empower working professionals when they have this need for new skills or new knowledge, so they can enter a new industry if they want.

ANDREW BUNTINE: That's exactly right, I mean a lot of people talk about the 60-year curriculum or the 70-year curriculum. Makes me feel exhausted thinking then how many years I still have to work (chuckle), but secondly I think it's acknowledging that life does change over the years, our needs change over the years, our interest change. You know I look at my teenage children and I stagger to think how many different things that they will have to go at over their life, I mean even in my time in this industry, and in online learning, my roles have changed dramatically, which is kind of nice thinking back to your first question about how did I get into this, and thinking about what my needs have changed over those times, and I've gone to upskill in different ways, both in the the higher and vocational sectors, and yeah I think I mean that's just going to develop more and more into the future I'd imagine.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah, so the university will really play a part in this lifelong learning journey of everyone.

ANDREW BUNTINE: That's right. I think an interesting development I've noticed over the last few years, it might have been sticking around for longer, is the idea of like a subscription-based education and training, so LinkedIn Learning, micro credentials in these spaces where you or your employer might pay for a bundle of learning that you can then... it's like streaming television, you sign up and then you pick what you want when you want it, and you develop your own entirely customised learning experience based on your needs.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah this sort of learning can never be done really really conveniently if it's face to face. That's the fascination of online, isn't it?

ANDREW BUNTINE: Well, that's it. Face to face just can't provide that level of flexibility. You need to have class space, teaching staff on hand 24/7, and having taught myself I really don't want to sign up to that job.

ANDREA LOU: We can feel that the universities are also undergoing some kind of change, if not restructure, to deliver this kind of future-oriented learning, so what do you think the universities should do in order to adapt to this kind of change?

ANDREW BUNTINE: That's a really good question, Andrea. I think it's one of those areas that different institutions have tried different ways of doing this, I mean, for some it's a centralised team, much like we have, for others it's localised, it's a skillset that's developed in different parts of the university, and for others it's sort of a combination or a hub and spoke model, between them. They all have their advantages and disadvantages, and I'd be remiss if I didn't take this as an opportunity to plug, but I think we've done it right at the University of Melbourne, by building a dedicated team of professionals across a range of specialties, who can all work together on this to support the other academic divisions. We come with an economy of scale, we come with the community of practise which is probably more important. We can develop our own expertise; we can sort of spread that expertise across the institution and hopefully eventually other areas will sort of pick up, and we're finite, so we can only do so much.

Hopefully by growing expertise across the university, we can work in conjunction more towards that sort of hub and spoke idea, but I think I'm having the core business we've got. We come with built-in redundancies and backup if folk move on or leave the institution. We can cross skill ourselves so that learning designers eventually become au fait in different areas, and other skill sets can do the same thing, so it's kind of like an internal flexibility that is only really afforded by having an organisation set up the way that we are. Plus it's a lot of fun to work in such a big team of creative and exciting people.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah, it's definitely been a highlight of my job to work with people from different faculties or from a different cultural background, each with their own expertise, and it's been a really dynamic experience to learn from everyone and observe different ways of doing things. It's not only fun, but also just feels quite rewarding, I would say, to make changes to the educational offerings and touch the lives of people who I'm sure will affect even more people out there.

So I guess this is how education empowers everyone, which is what makes our work meaningful, and online just amplifies the value. Well I guess this conversation about online learning will never stop here. We will definitely have a lot to talk about in our future episodes.

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ANDREA LOU: Thanks once again Andrew for joining us today in this episode of Learning Transformers! And thank you for listening. If you would like to view the transcripts of this episode, please head to our website at [mspace.unimelb.edu.au/podcasts](https://mspace.unimelb.edu.au/podcasts). Or You can simply find us by searching for the keywords "Learning Transformers MSPACE". We will post more episodes in the near future, so please stay tuned. Thanks again for listening and we will see you next time on Learning Transformers.

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