

# Podcast transcript

## Learning Transformers: Episode 2

### Interview with Lisa Wang

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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 are very happy to have Lisa Wang join us. Lisa has about 10 years of extensive work experience in the corporate world, having worked in many large organisations including Telstra, Deloitte, AGL and NAB, etc. In particular, she has worked as a human capital consultant at Deloitte and has deep insights in this ever-changing skills market. At the same time, Lisa has always had a passion for education and recently started to work as a tutor on a part time basis. Lisa and I have known each other for over 10 years, and I've always enjoyed our thought-provoking conversations, so today, Lisa, I'm really glad to formally have you here.

So to start with, I believe many of our audience, like me, would be interested to find out, from the perspective of a former human capital consultant, given this huge trend of online education brought by the pandemic and enabled by technology, especially in the area of professional learning, what kind of changes have taken place in the job market and workplace?

LISA WANG: Yeah I think that's a really good question, and I think learning used to be something that you do at school or uni in a classroom, so it's very much time bound. You go to uni, you do a degree, you start work, and you feel like that's all the learning to do for life. That's very wrong in my opinion, because learning nowadays, it's more fluid, it's continuous and also lifelong, and what I've seen is that it often is embedded into an employee's daily responsibility. Learning should be immediately applicable and available in real time, so I kind of think about changes across four different areas of life, in terms of where learning takes place; when learning takes place, why and how.

For where, learning used to be in the classroom, so very much offline, face to face, and there is still value in face to face learning I think, particularly since the pandemic, people really appreciate bouncing off ideas in person and you really feed off each other's energy, but I think there's this shift towards online obviously or hybrid learning similar to hybrid working environments.

That's the where, and then in terms of the when, I think it used to be more structure focused time, so you go to school or you go to uni for X number of hours a day, but now learning is more at time of requirements, so you might be working on a project, and you got a knowledge gap, so I need to go into a short course or something online in order to have the knowledge to do that project, so it's more task and goal oriented, which then links in with the the why of learning.

So in that example, if what you're trying to do is get the foundational knowledge that enables you to do the project, that's very different from going to uni where you kind of follow your interest or curiosity, and you really explore the concept to try and discover your passion, so I think the "whys" changed from kind of more exploratory type of learning to more goal-oriented learning. I'm doing this project, I have a knowledge gap, so therefore I need to do a short course in order to fulfill that knowledge gap.

I think the last changes also the “how” of learning, so the way content is delivered, like back when we were going to uni ten years ago, you know you turn up at a lecture theatre, you look at some lecture slides, the lecturer delivers the topic, you then you know get asked these questions, and you go to a room with the tutor. I think nowadays it's more role play interactive activities, how can we bring the learning to life and practise it in a more purposeful and tailored way, because that helps with your recall and knowledge retention. It doesn't even have to be a book. You don't have to read a book to be learning, you can be watching a YouTube video, like for example the other day I was wanting to do some formula in Excel. It's been like ages since I use Excel. I go on YouTube, and I go how do I work out and MPV equation and then you look at 5 minutes, you apply and that's it, you'll remember how to do it next time, so I think learning is less structured and formal and also at time of requirement.

ANDREA LOU: That's wonderfully said. Thank you, Lisa. I really like that structured way of thinking about way of learning, and I really agree with you about the fluid format of learning, so from experience and in a professional setting, what do you think is the most effective way of learning? Do you have any good experience of highly effective and genuine professional learning?

LISA WANG: I think as someone who works in incorporate, every year you have to do compliance training, so there's the mandatory component and then there's also a lot of personal development type of training that we're encouraged to do. What I find most effective in terms of format is three things: One, it needs to be relevant to your role; two is that it needs to be integrated into your role, so you're not having to find time from outside your busy schedule in order to do learning; and three is the blended medium, so use of digital and also hands on experience, role plays and all of those things make the learning fun, and therefore it's more memorable.

But I think the most important thing in my mind that makes learning stick is probably relevance to the role, so it has to be in-context, tailored content based on my role, so an example is we have to do... ('cause I work in energy now) it's highly regulated with requirements of compliance as I mentioned, and understand legal and regulatory obligations. It's often very very dry, we have a lawyer who kind of talks to us and because it was over Covid, it was online, but what I enjoyed was, I I work in product management, so parts of all sections of law were selected based on my role, questions and choices were all very specific to my role, and because I found it relevant, I found it interesting, but in other trainings I have done in other organisations, they were just like things you have to know but it wasn't tailored, even the examples were from like a completely different area, so that cause me to switch off, but I think if the learning is relevant to my role, it's integrated into my role, I'm not finding extra time to do the learning and it uses a mixture of different types of mediums to make it engaging, that's what makes learning effective in my opinion.

ANDREA LOU: Great, so in terms of the assessments, 'cause assessments are obviously a very important part in the entire training process, and you might have noticed that online professional learning can be very flexible and fluid in terms of both assessments or deadlines and even attendance, then how do you know that someone has successfully been upskilled? Would these credentials be less credible or reputable compared to traditional forms of qualifications?

LISA WANG: So in my case, because it was compliance training, if you get it wrong there are serious consequences in terms of penalties that your organisation and also gaol term for the employees, so I certainly took it very seriously, but I think generally speaking if we're talking about online learning, the way to test, to assess effectiveness will have to be through the assessments. I think my experience having done many compliance and different types of online training is that you know there's always a beginning and this is what we're going to cover, this is content that you cover and then you do your questions at the end to test your understanding.

Also student feedback is another way I think for you to gauge how successful effective the learning has been, but I think the quality of learning is probably a function of the knowledge that you gain and also the practice that actually occurs outside the virtual classroom, so the knowledge is dependent on how it's delivered, the medium that was delivered, was it engaging, how much do I retain as a student, I think that you have control over in terms of a learning designer or a facilitator, but the practice that occurs outside the classroom, that's really up to the individual and the motivation of the individual. If they had a particular goal in mind for doing the course or in the case of unique... they're very curious person, they're likely to go out the classroom and practise, try and teach concept to someone, but I think to assess effectiveness of online learning has to be through some form of assessment at the end or student feedback, but I wouldn't say the quality is very much dependent on the knowledge that's gained and also the practice that needs to happen after the learning.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah I believe it goes back to the design of the assessment in the end, 'cause we have to make sure the assessment is authentic enough to gauge the knowledge and skills that we are trying to assess in a particular experience. So I might let you put on your former human capital consultant hat for a little bit more time. From your previous experience, what kind of competencies or recognitions or qualifications do companies look for nowadays?

LISA WANG: I think what we talked a lot back then, all the literature, it was suggesting is focusing on developing enduring capabilities that won't become obsolete, and can be applied in any role or job as distinct from skills which are specific to a particular role, like for example, if you're in finance, you have to be very skilled in Excel, but an example of enduring skill could be like resilience or adaptability, or critical thinking, problem solving, so those are skills that will get you ready for the future regardless of changes in the environment, I mean, the economy, there's so much talk about automation and artificial intelligence taking over our jobs, but I think if we focus on the enduring capabilities that won't go out of date, that doesn't have a shelf life, then you're going to be set as things evolve in the pandemic.

In terms of the ones that I think are valued by organisations, and again it could be different from person to person, but the number one for me is critical thinking and problem solving, so the ability to analyse, evaluate, synthesise information, break down complexity and have a frame of a problem that you're trying to solve. The framing the problem piece can sound really simple, but it can get extremely difficult, because as the business you'll face... especially large corporations, you are going to have lots of different problems and then these problems conflict, you need to think about the customer, you need to think about the company commercials, you also need to think about your competitors, so at times by solving one particular problem, you could create a problem for another one of these stakeholders, for example if you're solving for profitability then that might end up being a poor experience with the customer, but if you do what's best for the customer, then you might create a commercial issue as well, so that ability just to deal with lots of information and be able to distil it down to the right problem to solve requires a lot of critical thinking, so I think that's quite a foundational skill to have.

The other one is, believe it or not, active learning itself is a skill, so the ability to always learn and and to learn quickly I think, as a consultant your ex-consultant I should say, you're put on different projects all the time and sometimes in industries that you're not familiar with. I think a key bridge to success is that sense of curiosity and having a broad education helps you to connect the dots quickly and form a point of view quite quickly as well, and that's required is part of job to ensure that your credible. I mean people are hiring for your advice and skills, so you need to convey that fairly quickly and so I think yeah the active learning and ability to learn quickly is going to be very important, and I think with online learning again you can do that whenever you need to, you don't need to have to go to uni, so uni is important obviously, but online just makes it more accessible and you can access that wherever you are and when you need it, could be late night when you're working on something.

So critical thinking, problem solving, active learning, I think the third enduring capability I'll recommend is your ability to adapt to change and how resilient you are. As they say, the only constant is change, so when you work in corporate, restructures are the norm, it could happen like every six months or every three or four months, it's more frequent, you always have new strategies, might have a new leader, and so if you are someone that just loves the status quo, you might find the environment challenging, because I think in this world that we live in your ability to embrace change, which I know is very hard for most people, but your ability to embrace change but and also see a way forward when you hit obstacles and setbacks would position you well at the workplace.

The fourth one I would say is curiosity, creativity and innovation. You're gonna hear innovation a lot in corporate, that ability to think differently, to do things in unexpected ways, and in my role as product manager, having to come up with new products and experiences in an industry that is quite commoditised, how do you do things that better than your competitors, if you don't have the ability to be creative and re imagine things then that's going to be challenging for a role like mine.

I think the last skill that has been mentioned everywhere, I still think it's another foundational very important skill, is communication. At the end of the day, it's human beings working with human beings, so your ability to verbalise your ideas, whether it's speaking or in writing, you know being able to be precise and concise with your language, influence people win them over, those are again very very important.

So yeah I would see critical thinking and problem solving, active learning and the ability to learn quickly, adaptability to change, curiosity, innovation and communication skills are enduring capabilities that'll serve you well regardless of the role that you're in, and they're highly transferable as well, so I think if you have those, even if you are faced with the restructure or there's constant change, you're going to be able to use those to pick up new skills and evolve yourself, reinvent yourself in a new organisation.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah definitely. Transferable skills are really needed in all kinds of roles and jobs, and even though we are working very distinct roles, I believe we can find a lot of overlapping in our position descriptions. I might add one question, Lisa. You were touching on the idea of, the capability... the skill of communication. I do agree with all the other ones which can be easily trained or fostered through online education, but will online learning make it a little bit harder than normal to train communication skills 'cause people are not able to look at each other face to face, will it be a little obstacle for us to train people in communication?

LISA WANG: So you're thinking different mediums for different skills development and in the case of communication face to face might be easier or more receptive. I think it depends on the individual. I think with the pandemic, everybody moving to online fairly quickly, I have noticed initially when we were doing video conferencing work, you know the extraverts in the room would always, in the virtual room, would always be more vocal, and I think me being introvert and seeing myself in the camera and I wasn't very comfortable with that initially, and I found myself to be quieter in in different meetings, but I think you adapt as virtual or online conferences become more common, you start to accept it and I think you kind of come out of a shell in a little bit. I don't necessarily agree that online isn't great for communication skills, I mean, we're having such a great conversation online right now, it's not face to face and I didn't need to get out of my house and commute, which means I'm definitely gonna be on time and you can still do the usual stuff that you would practise the communication skills, I think it's the keys having I guess a bit of... a set of tools for communication, good vocabulary, a grasp of vocabulary or concepts that we want to talk about, I don't see online as being a bit of an inhibitor to training communication.

In fact, I think it's part of our personal development. We had someone from my... i can't remember which... it was like an online institution, it was a facilitator who came to train us of communication skills and he was talking about how important communication skills are, and he did a bit of a poll at the beginning of the session asking how many hours have you spend on upskilling yourself on communication, and the answers range from like 2 hours to... I don't know, like five or ten hours, and if you think about it, communication is so crucial in our day-to-day interaction, whether it be just... gonna when you're out and about or when you're in the workplace, but we haven't actually devoted enough time to actively looked to hone our communication skills, probably going a bit off topic, but just wanted highlight importance of that, and my view is that I don't see online as inhibitor to developing communication skills, could be on line, could be offline, I mean you can if you're doing it online session, you can break people up into little breakout rooms maybe for the shy members of the participants, they might feel comfortable when it's one on one, but I would say since Covid most people would be open to on line, if not prefer, online.

ANDREA LOU: Yes basically I think we have redefined communication, 'cause everyone has picked up digital communication skills which is definitely a necessary skillset for everyone. What do you think all these changes mean for tertiary education? We're moving everything to online, including professional learning, or tertiary education, and for people who start university after 2020, basically their whole university experience could be online, so what do you think this means for tertiary education in the future? What will be the role of the university from now on?

I think universities need to reflect what happens in the community or in the workplace. With us coming out of the pandemic, there's been a lot of focus to get people back into the office and face to face interaction, I think the general consensus is that there is a reluctance to go back 100% of time, so we've been talking about hybrid working, and I think the same concept can apply to learning. It's a mindset shift from traditional in-classroom learning to hybrid experiential learning, so what I mean by that is looking at learning as an experience that you create for students very much like me as a product manager creating a product experience for our customers. You could take, you know, a human-centred design thinking approach and actually ask students, the users of universities, who are doing the learning, what are the jobs to be done? Like why do they want to learn? What are the needs and motivations? And what are some of the pain points and frustration that they experience currently with university learning? Could it be that I have to physically go there? Could that be a pain point and by making things online, I know when I was at uni, I was juggling part-time jobs as well, and if you are able to have achieved that balance, have a part time job, and then being able to log on at your convenience, save the commute time. It might just be a pain point that you are removing there.

And there's also joy points. I'm sure there things that the face to face learning in the lecture theatre that we miss as well. So what... how can we amplify it that should delight students or even evolve that to an online version, so I think it's understanding student needs and motivation why they're doing the learning, what are the pain points, what are the joy points, you then have an understanding of different student profiles, and then you can create your learning experience based on that understanding. But I think the key things to take away would be to create something that is relevant, tailored to student's needs, use blend mediums of digital and hands-on experiences, that's how you can maximise learning.

ANDREA LOU: Great, I think you have partly answered my next question, Lisa. We have already touch on how universities should do or what universities should do to deliver this sort of ideal format of education where we both remove the pain points and create more joy points like you said for our students, so apart from what we have touched on just now, what else could universities do to deliver this sort of ideal pattern of future education?

LISA WANG: I would say be guided by your students. It's been 10 years since you and I went to university, and I remember back in those days, we did have recorded lectures I believe, we were always encouraged to come learn on the campus, and I think being in touch with current student needs and what are those specific pain points and joy points, particularly coming out of the pandemic I think, those needs may have changed, so doing some kind of discovery with your groups of different students from different faculties, I mean someone from arts would be different from commerce, having a good grasp of what delights them and what frustrates them is a good starting point to then re-design you are learning experience. I think really treat it like a learning experience, similar to the way we do in the commercial world designing a product for a customer. It's truly understanding the customer to really delight them, and I think my personal view is online is great, it's very accessible, it's absolutely necessary given this whole shift to online due to the pandemic. I don't think we ever go back to 100% full time in classroom learning. We'll never go back to the office 100% the time. It's probably this shift to hybrid, recognising what is the skill that you trying to develop, what's the best forum to do that? Is that online or is that face to face? So for example, collaboration or teamwork, where you might want to have access to a big room or you're doing activities or requires some kind of physical interaction, and you might wanna do that face to face, but then other things it could be better handled online.

Maybe the other point is also personality as well. I think I was reading somewhere that some of the introverts prefer online because you don't always need to speak, you've also got the checkbox function in Teams for example, and some people might feel more comfortable conversing using words rather than speaking over the microphone, so again that's another reason for online to make it more accessible for different types of personalities and preferences, whereas if that introvert was in the classroom, they might be reluctant to put up the hand, it doesn't mean that they're not engaging with the content, they just have a different style, so I think the the future is hybrid learning rather than one or the other, because there are pros and cons in both.

ANDREA LOU: Yeah I think what you have mentioned is very similar to a mode of flipped learning which we have already been doing a lot in the university, and in our micro credentials we offer here at MSPACE, because we found out that we no longer need to sit for hours in those lecture theatres, it's not very interactive 'cause you never get to talk to the people... you rarely get to talk to the people who sit next to you. You only sit there and listen for an hour or maybe even two hours, and that can be easily done online by yourself in front of a computer, you absorb the same amount of information, and you can even pause or listen to it again if you need to, so that can be definitely replaced by online, by flipped classroom or flip learning. We replaced the lecture part with online learning, but for the rest of it we can still use face to face or synchronous activities where people do see each other either answer or teams or even face to face in the room like we used to do in tutorial rooms so we can maximise that experience and the efforts people spend to see each other either on Zoom or Teams, or even face to face in a room where we used to do in tutorial rooms, so we can maximise that experience, and the effort people spend to see each other, that probably means the effort we make to see each other should be better utilised, so we make the most out of it.

LISA WANG: Yeah 100% agree. I think you probably save a lot of time and effort commuting to get to places and you could use it in a different way. Yeah certainly there's definitely many opportunities to look at the pros and cons of both modes of learning and how we can mesh together the best part to create that great experience for the student.

ANDREA LOU: Right, you have just hit the point of being student centred, which means customer centred in the broader context. I believe this is something universal that can be applied across industries.

So, Lisa thank you for answering those big questions. Definitely not easy ones! It's been such a delight to talk to you, as always. And I appreciate you contributing to this episode of Learning Transformers.

For those who are listening to this episode right now, if you would like to listen to more episodes, please visit our website. You can find us by simply searching for the keywords "Learning Transformers MSPACE". We will post more episodes in the near future, so please stay tuned. Thanks so much for listening and we will see you next time on Learning Transformers.

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