



# Strategic Content Reuse in Microlearning

## Episode #17

with Joanne Bentley and Graham Edmondson

**Joanne Bentley:** [00:00:00] Hello, and welcome to the Leaders in Learning Design podcast by Blue Consulting and Resourcing, the place to get up to the minute information for cutting edge learning design.

**Graham Edmondson:** [00:00:25] Hi, Joanne. If you think back, what we've been talking about the last few weeks on this podcast has been the whole idea of reuse of content, repurposing, reusing, and all the ideas that we've discussed the last couple of weeks. As we've been thinking and talking about that, don't you think that really links to one of the other key things that we've been talking about ourselves?

Not so much on the podcast, but just in our business lives. We've been talking about microlearning, and do you think there's a big link between reuse and microlearning?

**Joanne Bentley:** [00:01:06] Definitely can be Graham. One of the easy ways to start down the path of developing microlearning is looking at the content that you have currently and decide which of those pieces would really benefit from being broken down in smaller chunks that allow the learners to revisit and reuse that material as reminder content.

One of the things that I'm very interested in is behavior change. And I don't think that when you blast a learner with new content in a four-hour workshop, that you get maximum behavior change. There's a reinforcement schedule over time that allows them to go back and revisit some of those pieces embedded maybe in their workday, where they've got 15 minutes or 10 minutes even to sit down and just revisit that material. You're going to see an increased amount of application. If you think about developing and breaking apart your content in that kind of a way for microlearning purposes.

**Graham Edmondson:** [00:02:12] So in that you mentioned four-hour workshops as an example, I'm sure that's not accidental because we've obviously got a curriculum of four-hour workshops, which have been delivered virtually for the last couple of years.

And what I've been doing after those workshops is sending one follow-up piece, which has typically been a synopsis of the key messages and a few additional links to other resources. But I think the way that we could use microlearning will be to think a bit beyond just sending a one-off recap. It's more about maybe breaking out some of the content and creating a series, if you like of microlearnings, that would then be part of a sustainment plan over a period of time to be pushed out to the people who've attended the workshop. Is that what you're getting at?

**Joanne Bentley:** [00:03:10] It is. And it's based on the research that came out of Harvard in the late seventies and early eighties as to how people really learn and this idea of "Learning to Learn" and using questions to drive the learning process. So, when you chunk that content out the way you were describing Graham, centered around a question, "how are

you going to use this? Well, how does this apply to your work today?" It triggers the subconscious mind to look for places to apply and those little chunks that you are sending out as refreshes drive that application deeper.

And so, every time they revisit that content, it becomes more a part of them and more a part of their process.

**Graham Edmondson:** [00:03:58] So during the workshop itself, of course, we try to do as much as we can to relate content to the real world. But if we're creating these microlearnings, we would accompany those microlearnings with the kind of question.

How does this particular topic, one of the topics that we covered in the workshop, how does this particular topic relate to something that you're currently dealing with? That's something that is relevant at this point in time, it's really taking each of those microlearnings and asking that specific question of the content that is in the microlearning. Yeah?

**Joanne Bentley:** [00:04:38] Yes, I think so. And if you want to take it even one step deeper, you ask them to take action. So, asking them how to apply would be sort of like a level one, but a level two sort of question embedded usually at the end of your microlearning is you want them to do something with this content? What is it you want them to do?

**Graham Edmondson:** [00:05:01] The famous call to action.

**Joanne Bentley:** [00:05:01] Absolutely.

And you don't have to name it as a call to action for the learner's purpose, but as instructional designers that's really what we want them to think of it as is that action step that they have to take. What do you want them to do? Do you want them to reflect, do you want them to write or journal?

Do you want them to send an email or behave differently or ask someone else a question? A small step that they can take that will drill that material down one step deeper.

**Graham Edmondson:** [00:05:40] It's funny though. You talk about microlearnings in this sentence as up or as post workshop experiences. Could we not envision things either ahead of the workshop or in fact, in lieu of the workshop, could we not take those four-hour workshops and decompose them almost into a series of small bite-sized pieces that could be pushed out as microlearnings in lieu of a workshop or possibly in advance of a workshop, not just after?

**Joanne Bentley:** [00:06:19] Absolutely. Four-hour workshops have a place, and that place is background knowledge. If you're starting into a new area and it's brand new and you need a breadth of information to get you started down a path, that's really helpful, but there's lots of content that isn't required.

It's small steps over time for a longer duration is much more helpful and figuring out what that just in time information might be, can be a bit tricky and sometimes it's even a bit daunting for instructional designers because the domain knowledge is not well-developed, and we don't know sequentially what topics and tasks build on each other.

Cause we haven't dug into that domain very deeply. And even if we have, and we have all of that laid out really succinctly, we don't necessarily know what the learner needs that day. So, for example, in your workshop on business decision-making anybody in business is making some kind of decisions most of the time, at least a significant decision, maybe once a week.

Could you push out chunks of relevant content over time for that particular workshop for business decision making that would allow them to practice the business decision-making meaningfully if they hadn't had any content on how to make decisions? That kind of discussion and thinking about how to break apart existing workshops, typically you find this some prerequisite knowledge, they need to know something. How big is that something and how do we want to break those pieces into something that's going to lead to useful applicable work on the job today?

**Graham Edmondson:** [00:08:15] Well how I could see that happening is if we go back to that workshop you described, the decision-making workshop, I think very approximately, maybe 30% of the time is teaching, lecturing, presenting, sharing of information. i.e., Me talking, I think we could cut that 30% into a series of much smaller, more digestible pieces. And we could push those out to learners almost with interim assignments. Well, here's an idea here for example, is what we mean by establishing the criteria for decision.

Here's some examples, here's effectively a microlearning on criteria for decision, and then the, to borrow your phrase, call to action. What we do at the end of the microlearning is ask people to apply that thinking to the decision that they're working on, to establish the criteria and to expect to move forward in the next microlearning with discussion of the next step, which would be prioritization or weighting of the criteria.

So that's probably how it could best work. And I suppose the big thing that you miss though in doing that, Joanne, is feedback. Because in the workshop, when people come back with those criteria, I can critique them. I can offer some experience, some guidance as to what is good and what could be better. Is that always not going to be missing from this idea of microlearning

**Joanne Bentley:** [00:09:53] it is. And what I see a lot of with the microlearning chunks is that they end their microlearning with some form of assessment. Typically, a multiple choice question of one kind or another. And I think that really stopped short of the value of microlearning. If you're setting them up to do something and you assume that they are an adult joining the microlearning for a legitimate interest, then you can stretch what they do for those calls to action, rather than just saying, how well do you remember this five minutes of instruction? I think we struggle a little when we try to stretch into content that came from workshops because we want to give feedback. We want to set them up with us as the "sage on the stage"... to use a very old phrase. But they could actually get feedback from someone else.

Yeah. So maybe the call to action, instead of being a multiple-choice question, or even a reflection, is "ask your boss, ask your colleague, get some feedback and experiment with this and see if this principle plays out for you in your situation." This trial-and-error kind of

reflection and using their resources, I think is really interesting for adult learners to teach them how to fish, how to use this process when we, as the instructor aren't there.

**Graham Edmondson:** [00:11:26] Good. Hey, one thing that I think we haven't really talked about, but I think it's really important that it's even the language that we use when we call it a micro-learning. I was talking with the client just the other day, and the question was, what do you mean by microlearning?

How micro is micro because their expectation was that a four-hour workshop might end up being the series of 30-minute microlearnings, but that's not quite micro enough, is it?

**Joanne Bentley:** [00:11:53] No, it's not... a 30-minute session is really a mini course. And I think we get a bit confused. I was just dealing with another client recently and they said, oh no, the longest we want is five minutes.

So, we sent them an outline. We sent them some content, which they promptly added a whole bunch of stuff to. Well, [they said] we need definitions. We need background, we need this, this and this. And they took that five-minute piece and made it almost 12 minutes. It was kind of humorous because they were so adamant that they couldn't even do seven minutes during their conceptual brainstorming session.

No, I think these [microlearning chunks] have to be five [minutes or less]. They've gotta be short. In reality, when they started reviewing it, 5 minutes wasn't what they actually wanted.

**Graham Edmondson:** [00:12:41] But that's surely an example of somebody with all the best intentions in the world not really understanding what microlearning is and not understanding how it's designed to work?

I mean, they're trying to bring some old thinking into what is in a sense, a new innovation or new way of doing something. So that's going to be a problem for us I think not just in that situation, but generally speaking, because there won't be a long introduction that sets out all of the objectives, explains the mechanics, the timeline, the agenda, the flow, the recognizable piece that goes at the front of a learning event.

That's not going to find its way in most cases into a microlearning. These are going to be short, impactful pieces of learning, which are designed to achieve a specific end result. I think it's a different way of looking at things. And until we can get everybody to understand that, and maybe, the best way is to do that through demonstration and examples, and to show people rather than trying to talk about it in these conceptual terms. So maybe what we can do in another podcast, Joanne is talk to a very specific example and talk about what makes for good microlearning.

**Joanne Bentley:** [00:13:59] I think that'd be a great idea. Thanks for discussing, microlearning and how we can reuse some of our existing content. I think it's a natural extension from what we've already been discussing recently.

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