

THE FUTURE OF L&D IS... AI!

Donald Clark is a frequent speaker at conferences and seminars all over the world. His outspoken views guarantee interesting and thought provoking sessions. I've had the pleasure to attend quite a few of them myself and enjoyed the opportunity to speak with Donald in this one-to-one interview. Please read his answers to my questions below with a Scottish accent in mind:

How would you describe learning a development 10 years from now?

My specialty is in Technology and L&D, so I will focus on that. Mary Meeker publishes data every year on where technology is going. When you look at her slides this year, we know one thing for sure: The top 10 tech companies on the planet have artificial intelligence as their main technological L&D push or strategy. So we can be sure that AI is going to be huge. In fact, it's already huge. Google is the second largest company in the world, and it's a pure AI company. Other companies in the top ten like Facebook, Netflix, Twitter etc. are all mediated by AI. The user experience is mediated by AI. So it's not so much what L&D will be, it's what learners will be doing and they will be learning online more and more. A second huge shift in the market has been the way in which people use technology. So there are two main things here that stand out. One is the switch towards voice. About 10% of all searches are by voice. More and more people have an Alexa or Google Home... So we'll be able to learn by speaking, which is what we have done and are still doing in school. And the second one is dialogue and messaging, chatbots and so on. If you look over the shoulders of anybody under the age of 30, then they're not looking at websites, they're not using voice on mobile phones. They're actually using Messenger apps. Chatbots will be huge. These are the sort of things, that will start to creep into the world of L&D through technology. Of course, L&D is an incredibly conservative and conformist profession, so they will expect the same old sit around the table in a hotel room with a pen and pad, with some sweets in the middle, and a glass of water... You know, the usual L&D stuff that never did work and never will work.

Would you say L&D is doomed?

No, I don't think so. I think as learning becomes part of the workflow – I think that will happen – then L&D will have less of a role in just building big courses. Courses are getting smaller and smaller, people have less of a tolerance for them. People don't really want to sit in a room for two or three days with a flip chart, or even half a day, even conferences... I just never go to training sessions. If I'm in a room, when I'm sitting at one of those round tables, I'm bored before it started. I think people are getting a bit fed up with that stuff. They want to learn in a more dynamic fashion, in the workflow, in the workplace. I think with performance support coming along, and chatbots in Slack, Microsoft Teams, Facebook and so on, you can learn as you work. That's how it should be.

What will the role of L&D be in that new world?

First of all, I'm not quite sure what it will exactly be in 9-10 years' time, but there are several things that need to happen. One is we have to stop just being obsessed by the delivery of courses. Most people in L&D still believe that learning styles exist, despite ten, fifteen years of evidence that they do not exist. I repeat, do not exist. We're still using

Myers-Briggs this old tool from 50 years ago that has no predictive value. I don't know what it's like in your part of the world, but in the UK and America, there's now a huge number of faddish courses on "Unconscious Bias". I don't know who gave L&D or HR permission to explore my unconscious, but I think it's bordering on the ridiculous that they have access to my unconscious. I'm an adult, they don't know what they are doing. They are using tools that they have no idea about if they are valid or not, or reliable... The first thing they have to do is stop picking up on every fad that comes along. And there have been many, many of those. Last year it was Mindfulness. This year it's Unconscious Bias. Who knows what it will be next year, but we've got to stop just saying, "Oh yeah, this is new. Let's make a course".

These days you see a lot of use of virtual reality and augmented reality. Which to you has the biggest value in learning?

Let's take AR first, because that's been a bit of a disappointment for me. First of all, it's incredibly expensive. Microsoft HoloLens costs \$3000 and many of the applications I've seen have been quite poor. VR is very different and I'm a bigger fan of VR in a sense, because you're completely taken into a new world. Inside, let's say, an operating theater for healthcare, or you could be floating around the International Space Station and teaching physics. I think that total immersion really focuses the mind. And of course the tension is a necessary condition for learning. In a classroom you cannot go subatomic into space, or into dangerous places for health and safety and so on. I've seen some really



good VR applications. I've seen less interesting stuff on AR and after all the big buzz around Pokémon Go, there hasn't been much else. But a bigger one is AI. AI will be much, much, much bigger than either AR or VR. It's the technology that affects almost everything we do online. It already has. AI is the new user interface. It doesn't matter what you do, as soon as you switch your cell phone on, use Google, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Netflix, Amazon... That's all mediated by AI. So it's not a future issue. It's absolutely here right now and that's why we can be sure that that would have a massive influence.

There's also the fear of data privacy, of course, with the recent story about Alexa, suddenly picking up what somebody was saying before it was called upon. What do you think about that?

I think Europe is in some trouble here. Ferguson wrote a good book about it recently, and Mary Meeker also addressed it in her slides. Both of them warn that Europe has lost the plot here and that Europe is simply becoming a regulator. And that they will lose out on the developments around AI because they're just obsessed by creating more regulation, rather than looking for the opportunities. And we're throwing the baby out with the bath water as they say in English. I think a lot of it is exaggerated. That Alexa case, sure these things happen, but it's no big deal. In L&D, who is interested in training data? Really. It's not as if there's a room of Russians sitting somewhere hanging on every word, or interested in some of these really awful PowerPoint slides. I don't think we have a huge amount to fear there. It's right, that we should be doing some regulation. I think that the GDPR was a hugely over engineered exercise, that has led to a huge loss of productivity. That's my belief here

Could you imagine in the future that I would be doing this interview with a Donald Clark chatbot?

Of course! Toby Walsh wrote a very good book called *Android Dreams*, probably the best introduction to artificial intelligence. And he already noted the idea of a chatbot that is your doppelgänger. It knows all your speech patterns and so when you die, people can still speak to you. It's a very weird, spooky idea. But actually it's already happened. There's a chatbot called Replika, which becomes you, effectively. As usual with really exciting technology, it will push to the (moral) limits, but this is how technology works. It comes and we learn to deal with it. We have some reasonable regulation. Every technology has a downside. Most people drive cars, but 1.3 million people a year die horrible deaths in cars. But we still drive cars, because we think the overall benefit outweighs the disadvantages. And that's true of almost all technology. The danger here is that we're almost killing AI before we even know what it is, before it has had a chance to do anything. Because of a YouTube video around Alexa. And I think Europe is really losing the plot here. There are committees all over Europe, set up to discuss the ethics of AI. There are more people discussing the ethics of AI, than doing AI, which seems ridiculous to me.

Another hot topic these days is blockchain. How do you think it could be used in the world of learning?

About two years ago I wrote an article called "10 ways blockchain could be used in education". Blockchain was developed as a piece of technology that drove crypto currency in bitcoin. But you really have to disen-

gage it from Bitcoin. You can see it being used in badges, credits, and qualifications. There are projects which are using a database structure, which is unhackable, that allows you to store and track qualifications, credits and badges. The problem is that this is quite a tricky piece of technology. You really have to know what you're doing to handle it. Some institutions, mainly universities that have research departments, have been using it. For example the use of blockchain to authentically store the qualifications by a student, which allows the employer to authenticate what that qualification is. A group of universities could get together, and by sharing authentication, it might mean that it's easier for students to move from one university to another. A good example is the University of Delft who have teamed up with EPFL in Switzerland, UBC in Canada and several others. Blockchain could be applied to all students to get qualified and authenticate their module attainment. A bit like code share in airlines. Or you can have a national blockchain database where national qualifications are stored, or you can even see it going up to the EU level. Without the UK, of course (laughs)... Sony Global Education uses a blockchain platform that houses assessment scores on a global level. Blockchain and MOOCs is also interesting, because one could see the qualification of pure online courses as a rival to college courses. Blockchain has one fatal weakness though, and that is that it uses up a huge amount of energy. People are getting a bit suspicious of its efficacy in terms of sustainability. So it has an Achilles heel.

A couple of years ago I heard you speak about WildFire, an application which can create an e-learning course within minutes. Could you tell a little bit more about that?

That's now a successful company (Donald Clark is a board member). So you literally take a video or a document or a PowerPoint and it creates e-learning content in minutes and at a fraction of the cost. And that's mainly because it uses AI and eliminates much of the human task of identification of the learning points. But it's also now a much more sophisticated tool. It now works with voice. WildFire will allow you to speak, so you can navigate through the learning experience and you can answer the questions by voice. I also have a partnership with a company called Learning Pool. It's a chatbot called Otto, that sits above the LMS. That, I think, is some of the newer stuff that's emerging in this area. And it's of course all AI driven.

Is there any message that you would like to give to the L&D community in Belgium?

Yeah, I think... (laughs) ...Stop regulating! It would be nice if the people in Brussels maybe think about creating the future rather than just the living in the past and trying to destroy every new initiative that comes along. They're crippling, really crippling Europe's ability to innovate. I think the second thing would be for L&D to start just to throw out some of the old practices: Meyers-Briggs, all the faddish stuff, Neuro Linguistic Programming, putting learning objectives in the front of every course and jumping on every bandwagon that comes along... And to take technology more seriously, but real technology that real people use in the real world. And that's by and large AI. So I think the message is to be more business focused and behave like the real world, rather than see yourself as delivering courses. ■



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