

The Fearless Thinkers Podcast | Season 2, Episode 10  
**Elements of a thriving learning ecosystem, with Andrew Burns**

**Defining the learning ecosystem**

**Andrew Burns:** Myself and a handful of other partners across BTS globally [have] been going on a listening tour and engaging with different clients to understand how they were addressing learning, and shaping their learning organizations to support the rapid change that came about because of Covid. A big part of what we're coming back to [are] clients' [challenges] in optimizing their learning ecosystem to be more flexible, to take advantage of the new technologies that existed, and ultimately, to create a more robust learning culture.

What is a learning ecosystem? It's all facets that come together to support leaders and people at all levels (and teams) to share knowledge to build the capabilities needed to execute their strategy, [becoming] productive and [creating] a better work environment. This ecosystem has just been a fascinating area that's really shifted my own perspective.

**Rick Cheatham:** Cool. Could you break it down a little bit further?

**Andrew Burns:** The reason I use the word ecosystem is to recognize that we have to move out of this controlled, programmatic episodic approach to learning, where everything is top down; highly structured. It needs to have this flexibility, recognizing there's not a one size fits all; needs to be more than just training. It's about workforce readiness. It's about helping people adapt to the changing environments and the changing landscape. And it's about really helping shift both organizational and individual culture much faster.

**Three elements: content, context, and community**

There is no shortage of **content**. You search some of these libraries for how to have a feedback conversation. You have 900 results. The fundamental challenge is that they had turned on one of these libraries for their 80,000 employees, and they had about 400 monthly active users. The willingness to use it wasn't there – it was too much content.

A lot of it also comes down to **context**. What's the context in which I can use this content, and how can I connect with other like-minded peers or colleagues who are wrestling with the same type of ideas, and ultimately bring it to life through conversation, discussion, and practice? Where we've been focusing on is the curation of the "best of" content.

The area that I'm really excited about is the ability to answer faster using AI tools.

**Rick Cheatham:** Makes a lot of sense to me. You know, before I even got into this world at all, I just was like, it's all but cruel for us to give these people new skills but not show them where in life they're required or how to use them. I'm curious about how, from your perspective, **community** fits in. Aspects of how they really help people to learn and change.

**Andrew Burns:** It comes back to this paradox. **Every high-performing team, outside of the business world – you think about a sports team, you think about military acquire a symphony – they spend 99% of their time practicing, and only 1% actually performing. It's completely the opposite for us in the business world: we spend our time in the flow of work, kind of learning as we go.** But how do we create these intentional opportunities to practice? We so often throw people into the deep end, whether it's teams or individual leaders, without giving them an opportunity to get feedback.

So, there's no shortage of how experiences can be created. We need to create the experience that disrupts a mindset that they may have facing a situation, whether you're using a simulated experience or other mechanisms. Helping disrupt creates this rush of like, "Oh, I didn't think about it this way; I'm willing to try something else." And then, when you supplement that with the content that's contextual, [along with] rich communities that can sustain and create accountability, that's the recipe for an incredible growth in both the maturity of an organization, maturity of a learning culture, and skills for the future.

**Rick Cheatham:** That whole concept feels like – careful practice and preparation allows people to shine, versus trying to figure out how to do things for the first time when the challenge arises.

### **Practicing for the performance**

**Andrew Burns:** What is the moment where you need to really show up differently? And how can we help people understand what great looks like in that moment, help them practice that, help them get feedback on that? What we're trying to create is this awareness of, like, "I'm encountering a situation that's going to be critical for me to get right. I can think back to the experience I had when I practiced it; I can reach out to that community to get additional guidance; and there should be contextual content that I can capture through AI, or through a recommendation engine, that [will] allow me to reinforce [the learning]."

**Rick Cheatham:** All of this to me feels like... One of those things that is both familiar and logical. How we pull it together, I think, is where the magic potentially happens.

### **Three obstructive elements**

**Andrew Burns:** There's three things that I keep on seeing that get in the way of learning organizations.

The first thing is **programmatic thinking**. By the nature of how we're structured, we are looking to break down and prioritize work and assign resources to that. It's much easier to do that to linear programs that are episodic and predictable. [However], the more programmatic that we become, and the less agile we are as a learning organization, the more frustrated the individual leaders will become and therefore look elsewhere to access the skills that they need.

The second piece is **the attractiveness that technology** creates that overcomplicate a learning ecosystem. Technology needs to ultimately complement your learning strategy; it shouldn't be the other way around. So often I see organizations fall in love with the technology, then try to match their learning strategy in order to make that technology work.

The third piece, which I can't emphasize enough, requires a really intentional focus [on driving continuous engagement]. It's not a **one-and-done initiative**: engagement is a continuous process. If you want people to continuously learn, you have to look for ways to continuously engage them. You have to shape things and communicate things in ways that are going to speak to the end of the user and drive awareness and advocacy of that learning ecosystem.

**Rick Cheatham:** For those that don't have the positional power in their organization to make radical changes in their learning ecosystem today, what's your best advice for them?

**Lastly: focus.**

Andrew Burns: [Identify] the one area of focus that your business leaders or your organization care about right now and apply some of these concepts to [it]. **Even though community, content, and experiences can cover a wide gamut of curriculum topics, go deep on one experiment to get traction. It is much easier to get people to buy into a single area of focus.**

One example. We have a client who, over the last several years, has been focused on customer centricity, but they're also starting to see a drop in productivity and accountability. The senior leaders in that organization [said], "Hey, we need to drive a culture of accountability." One of our clients who didn't have a big budget really started to look at that as, "Hey, this is the door that's open right now. How can I latch on to culture of accountability... to create community, experiences, and contextualized content, and supported that area of focus? As any influencer within the learning organization, how

can you attach these ways of operating, get creative with it, and deliver it into your learning culture?"

Because what works for a software company isn't going to work for an oil and gas company. Your community content experiences also need to be shaped and contextualized to your learning environment.

**Rick Cheatham:** It's always great advice to stand as close to the business imperative as humanly possible.

**Andrew Burns:** You know, it's not always title, either. Sometimes power and influence can sit anywhere in the organization, and so – understanding who ultimately has the influence – get those folks to advocate, to sponsor, to support the areas that you're focused on. The engagement, and the others, will follow that as well.

**Rick Cheatham:** Thank you, my friend. You've given us a lot to think about.

**Andrew Burns:** Thanks, Rick. Always a pleasure.