

Spotlight on ... Laura Overton

The first lady of research and benchmarking, **Laura Overton** reveals more about her road to success

Laura Overton is the founder and CEO of Towards Maturity and in 2016 is celebrating 30 years in the L&D industry; the first 16 as a practitioner with leading digital learning suppliers and the last 14 independently researching, advising and sharing effective practices through the Towards Maturity Benchmark programme.

Passionate about the critical but changing role of L&D professionals in business and throughout her career, Laura has been driven by helping the L&D function embrace learning innovation to better support business and individuals who work in them. Whilst the role of technology in learning has underpinned her thinking, Laura is not a technologist, she is captivated by the people and business side of the equation – by the way that adults learn in the workplace, by business outcomes and by implementing change both in L&D teams and the businesses they support.

The success of Towards Maturity is demonstrated by the 4,500 L&D leaders from 55 countries having used the Towards Maturity Benchmark to prioritise their actions by reviewing their L&D strategy and independently comparing it with top performing peers. The L&D perspective is balanced by providing a learner voice: since 2003 they have captured how 23,000 individuals really learn at work (with or without L&D). Laura's philosophy has always been to freely share the findings and she has authored more than 35 reports and 200 articles, conducted workshops and spoken at conferences around the globe.

Laura is an academic fellow of the CIPD and she is on the steering board of Online Educa Berlin – where she helped instigate the Business Educa programme. She has delivered

keynote presentations around the globe in Australia, Singapore, Japan, America, London and Berlin. In 2010 Laura was the first female recipient of the LPI's Colin Corder Award and in 2012 she was awarded the first Special Achievement Award at the elearning age awards.

Why training and how did you start?

I am one of those rare people who wanted to make a career in 'training' from the start. My degree was in maths and psychology but it was my responsibility for training the hall reps as part of the leadership team of the Christian Union at Uni that gave me a taste of what I really wanted to do – help other people achieve their potential. In my first job interview to join a training department, I was asked to take a typing test and I blagged my way into a job offer by promising to learn to touch type if they offered me a job. They did, and I learnt a critical skill that is essential to everything I do today.

One of my first responsibilities was to run the 'Learning Centre' – a video library kept under the stairs for IT professionals to build their skills. In the corner of the darkened room was an interactive video kit that completely fascinated me. As a new graduate in psychology it completely made sense as it just connected with what I knew about the way that adults learn. I was hooked and that early passion was given the opportunity to develop when I was headhunted into two of the most formative and forward thinking technology learning companies responsible for shaping an industry at the time – SmartForce and NetG.

Who or what inspires you?

I am inspired by opportunity and optimism. I believe that L&D can really add to the bottom line and change people's lives and I am inspired



by those who not only have a vision for doing things differently but also set about making it happen. Inspiration has come from all directions from amazing technology visionaries in the 1990s through to L&D leads working it out in practice like the charity sector where time and resources are so tight it's suffocating.

I am also inspired by connecting ideas from different sectors. I have built a strong business background and interest in marketing. Listening to experts in these fields and applying that thinking to learning principles has provided me with some real 'Aha' moments.

The amazing team at Towards Maturity also provide me with constant inspiration. We are a diverse team with very different backgrounds and perspectives. Working with them is a joy and they never fail to challenge me, teach me and keep me on track!

What and when was your career turning point?

The first 16 years of my career was spent in the amazingly fast paced world of technology-based learning. I was working at the cutting edge of learning innovation at the dawn of the internet and working with forward thinking L&D leaders to explore what change would be needed and how to implement that change. When the dotcom bubble burst however, things slowed down and I was given the opportunity to take voluntary redundancy. This was my turning point, my breathing space.

Exhausted from a high octane career, I decided to take time out to get to grips again with what really motivated me to get out of bed in the mornings. Now I was 'free' what did I really want to do? At the time there was a lot of talk about 60 per cent of e-learning projects failing and I decided just to do a bit of personal research into the 'successful' organisations. I had no agenda and 16 organisations were recommended to me as doing 'this stuff well'. I used my free time to interview those organisation L&D leaders to find out what success looked like for them and what they did to achieve it.



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I also used my connections in the e-learning world to provide me with a survey tool (there was no SurveyMonkey around at the time) that would also allow me, sceptic that I am, to get the perspective of over 2,000 learners from those organisations. My first report – *Linking Learning to Business* – was the first independent study to involve learners and to highlight that success with learning technology was less about technology and more about applying business thinking to learning strategy. These organisations and learners were really delivering bottom line impact and loving the journey. They provided an inspiration to others and helped me to get my mojo back – the rest, as they say is history!

What has been your lowest moment, and what your noblest hour?

The government funded most of our research in the first four years – firstly via the sector skills councils and then through Becta. It set the tone of what we wanted to do with our research programme by enabling us to freely share what we knew with others. The lowest point was when all funding was withdrawn overnight. It meant that we had to completely rethink our strategy for supporting L&D leaders in their pursuit of excellence and work out new ways of providing a benchmark service, which was free to use.

I will always be grateful to our founding ambassadors – organisations like the Charity Learning Consortium, LEO, Brightwave who all shared our values that free independent research needed to be available to everyone. They stepped up to the challenge of continuing the programme and we now have 25 ambassadors and 20 industry supporters from around the world who have ensured the research has grown from strength to strength.

Each time our work is honoured is a fine hour! From the awards that I have personally received through to the independent feedback we get from individual companies on how the benchmark process has helped them to take the next step, win new resources for their teams or reset priorities.

Describe your best learning and development experience?

Being involved in Towards Maturity's ongoing research has provided me with a rich, incredible, ongoing learning opportunity. Inputs from more than 4,500 L&D leaders and 23,000 learners in the workplace has provided me with singularly



Singapore

All about me

Age: I was born in the same year as *The Sound of Music*, independent Singapore and *Training Journal*!

Family: I am married to Nigel Stally, a co-director in Towards Maturity and my amazing extended family includes two stepdaughters, my niece and nephew and four godchildren.

Location: An Essex girl who moved to Wimbledon 22 years ago.

Hobbies: I love to cook but I am not averse to cheating to save time – there is nothing better than having a full table surrounded by friends and family!

Favourite place: We have a bolt hole in Estepona in Spain a few minutes from quiet beaches for walking. Come rain or shine, it's my favourite place for reflecting, writing and seeing things from a fresh perspective.

Books: I love immersing myself in an old fashioned thriller – nothing too taxing, just a roller-coaster ride that whisks you away for a couple of hours. I get through them fast, move on quickly and can't even remember the last one that I read!

Music: I have eclectic tastes when it comes to music and I love it when I am recommended something new. I am thoroughly enjoying surfing through the playlists on Amazon Music.

Movie: The only movie I have ever seen on the big screen twice within the same week is *Les Miserables*. The story of grace triumphing over injustice is compelling and deeply moving.

Technology: I have lived and worked in and around London for 30 years and I used to go everywhere via the Tube, never even considering alternatives. Downloading my favourite app – Citymapper – opened my eyes and changed my perspective to the way I travel. It lifted my head to the amazing city that I live in so that I spent less time looking at the screen and more time enjoying the view. For me that's what technology should be about!



Towards Maturity team



Estepona



The 360 degree

"Laura's work with Towards Maturity is real world, pragmatic, current and tangible offering massive value for enterprises seeking to optimise people performance and capability. In an organisational world filled with buzzwords, fads and hollow academia every participant commented in glowing terms at the practical 'Do it Now' strategic value derived from the sessions. Laura is a genuine inspiration and delight."

Mark Fenna-Roberts, ITC Learning Australasia

"Laura has grown Towards Maturity from an idea into the powerhouse of benchmarking that it is today. She has brought sharp focus to our industry and done what others could not. She is the ultimate professional, full of wise words, deeply passionate about performance and learning and one smart lady who I am truly honoured to know and work with."

Sarah J Lindsell, PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP

"Laura Overton has taken her passion for our industry to whole new level. Through Towards Maturity she has single-handedly provided the workplace learning industry with the data it needs to set future direction. The resilience she has shown to stick with this for more than a decade – especially through some of the years where she had to struggle to keep people's interest – is truly amazing. The effort has paid off. From us all...thank you Laura!"

Piers Lea, Learning Technologies Group

"For well over a decade Laura has been providing us with some great insight through her benchmarking activities. She has to be the best connected person in the industry and has contributed to shaping our learning strategies on

the best learning experience of my career.

However, when it comes to my best 'formal' learning experience, I have to come back to an experience in my mid-twenties. I was a very ambitious individual at that time and I felt that my career aspirations were somewhat thwarted. I will always be grateful to long-time colleague, Julian Wragg, who suggested investing my bonus back onto myself. I enrolled on a 13-week Dale Carnegie programme, which in hindsight provided a perfect blend! Fifty of us met together each week, we were provided with 'micro content' to introduce a new topic together with check lists and advice to go away and apply it.

Each week the majority of the session was spent on the 50 of us taking two minutes to feedback on how we had applied the previous week's principle – the ultimate user-generated

many occasions. The Towards Maturity Benchmark reports are now seen as an essential resource for L&D professionals."

Mike Booth, Vodafone

"Laura's long experience, deep knowledge and great network make her an invaluable source of expertise in the fields of learning innovation for professional development. I have worked with Laura for many years and her enthusiasm and passion have made a considerable contribution to the success of the special business track of our annual OEB conference. She is a wonderful speaker and facilitator as well as being a warm, supportive and kind person."

Rebecca Stromeyer, ICWE GmbH

"CIPD has been collaborating with Laura Overton and the Towards Maturity team for several years now. Laura has bags of energy, commitment and genuine passion for her work. Her desire to really highlight where learning practitioners can develop and grow enables the rest of the profession to focus on the key areas for improvement, for ourselves, our organisations and our own people. Laura is always excited by the prospect of learning and change and her attitude is infectious."

Gill White, CIPD

"Laura loves to be agile which demands a fast-paced working environment! But the reward is in those moments of magic when we create something brand new and inspiring. She is a strong leader but remains teachable and carries humility, which enables the team to be innovative and drive what we do in a unified way. I really enjoy working with Laura's down to earth approach and I have learnt a lot of great things in my time at Towards Maturity"

Levi Phillips, Towards Maturity

content, packed with peer review, recognition and encouragement. It was powerful stuff and I used the skills to negotiate my next career move in the company and persuaded them to cover the full cost of the programme. A great investment, a great experience that delivered skills that I have drawn on throughout my career.

What's next in your career?

Very excited about the international opportunities for the Benchmark Programme and hopefully there is a book or two in me!

Playing to win

Keep true to yourself

What is your real passion at work? Take time to find it and pursue opportunities to tap into it. What are your values, in the

workplace and beyond? Don't be compromised by circumstances or peer pressure.

Keep offering your best

'Whatever you do, do it to the best of your ability.' My mum gave me this advice while I was still at school and is something I have applied ever since – it's especially helpful in situations where our contributions are not always appreciated (at first!).

Keep agile

It's important to keep moving in order to keep ahead. Spot the breaks that will benefit your customers and community and act on them fast. Don't be constrained by perfectionism, spot something, try something, see if it works. If it does, develop it further, if it doesn't move on!

Keep practicing.

When you try something new it can be hard work, so don't give up too soon! About 14 years ago Clive Shepherd encouraged me to write articles, something I could not imagine myself doing or imagine anyone else being interested in. Despite serious concerns I decided to give it a go. The first 800 words took me about three weeks to write but since then I have written in excess of 200 different articles. Anything new takes time to build confidence and ability but it's important to grab the opportunity when it's presented.

Keep perspective

Make time for the helicopter view by taking time to step out of a situation, stop and reflect.

Keep challenging

But do it graciously! Employers, customers, colleagues will always have reasons not to do things differently but if you are equipped with good evidence, rather than egotistical hunches, then keep challenging the status quo.

Keep encouraging

This is something I am not always good at but have benefited tremendously from. It's important to look for the best in people to create opportunities to spur each other on to excellence.

Keep an open mind

Don't constrain yourself by limiting your sphere of influence. I have learnt so much from other disciplines and sectors (marketing, engineering, sales). We face similar challenges but have different solutions that can give us a real breakthrough in our own.

Inspiration has come from all directions from amazing technology visionaries in the 1990s through to L&D leads

Keep connected

Build networks that build you up and you can add value to, build relationships that go beyond the tweet, build teams that have the skills that you don't.

Keep grounded

Don't believe your own press or judge your value or sense of worth from the number of likes and shares you've received, the lists you are on or the awards you've achieved.

Keep listening

If you have a new idea, it can be improved. If you want to engage people, make sure you understand the language they use. If you want to motivate, find out what makes them tick – it's critical to learn to listen.

Keep optimistic

Too many give up on their ideas and expectations by succumbing to scepticism. We had a vision of the potential online learning back in 1999 went beyond the course to supporting community, connection, personalisation, performance. In 2016, circumstances have changed and our vision then has real potential to be a reality now. If you believe something, go for it, keep true to yourself! **TJ**

Further info

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Download the first and latest reports:
Linking Learning to Business – 2004 <http://towardsmaturity.org/article/2008/06/11/linking-learning-business-original-research-2004/>

Embracing Change – 2015 www.towardsmaturity.org/2015benchmark

To nominate an L&D professional whom you feel deserves recognition in the pages of *TJ* contact the editor at debbie.carter@trainingjournal.com