



Now's the Time: The Year That Was

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 286

Jeff Cobb (00:03):

In general, it feels like 2021 was the beginning of a great experiment. And it's far from clear at this point how it's all going to turn out. I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:16):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb (00:23):

Welcome to episode 286, our first episode of 2022. And now strikes me as a natural time for reflecting and making some resolutions.

Celisa Steele (00:34):

I think you're definitely not alone in thinking that, Jeff. Case in point, all the gratitude practices that crop up at the end of the year, that get people remembering what they have to be thankful for. Another case in point, the gym membership surge that tends to happen at the turn of a year. Dan Pink writes about the importance and power of timing in his book *When: The Scientific Secrets of Perfect Timing*. And that's because there are times when it's easier or better to do something. There are these natural points when the body or mind is more receptive to thinking or doing or working out or whatever.

Jeff Cobb (01:11):

And you got the chance to speak with Dan Pink about that for the podcast a while back. We'll definitely link to that conversation in the show notes for this episode. For today, we'll simply say that we're going to ride the wave and do what's natural at this time of year and do a little reflecting.

Celisa Steele (01:26):

As folks working in learning businesses, you know the value of reflection. Reflection is a very powerful tool for learning. In fact, we dedicated one of our early podcast episodes to reflection, and that's another episode we'll be sure to link to in the show notes for this episode. But what we want to do right now is spend some time looking back at 2021, with an eye to what we can learn from the year that's been and what we might carry forward.

Jeff Cobb (01:54):

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available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode286.*

And a lot definitely happened in 2021. In any given year a lot happens, but 2021 had some extras. There was a new president here in the U.S. There was, of course, an ongoing pandemic, including the rise of the Delta variant and, more recently, Omicron; widespread wildfires; and then space tourism. That's just to name a few. But if we focus in on the learning landscape in 2021, how would you sum it up in a word if I were to ask you, Celisa? And I am, in fact, asking you.

Celisa Steele (02:24):

I think you know, Jeff, that I hate being limited. I don't like being asked my favorite book or favorite movie, or favorite whatever because I have a hard time choosing just one. Summing up all of 2021 learning in just a single word feels kind of unfair.

Jeff Cobb (02:39):

Okay, you can have a few words—a phrase even—if you'd like.

Celisa Steele (02:42):

No, I will stick to the assignment. If I had to sum up the learning landscape in 2021 with a single word, I'd go with *essential*. Learning started to show itself as essential before 2021, but the ongoing pandemic and the changing nature of work have showed learning was extremely important and necessary and also fundamental, which is another meaning of *essential*. Learning is so necessary and fundamental that, even given the delivery challenges caused by COVID, we collectively, as a society, tried to figure it out. How do we as learning organizations continue to provide learning? And how do we as individuals take advantage of what's out there and continue to grow and develop ourselves? Now, Jeff, I'm going to ask you. If you had to describe the 2021 learning landscape in a word or phrase, how would you sum it up?

Jeff Cobb (03:42):

I'll go with a word, and that word is *unbalanced*. And I mean that more positively than it may sound, as I think probably a great deal of opportunity in 2022 is the lack of balance that's out there right now. We saw, of course, a tremendous rush to online beginning in 2020. Obviously, that tipped the balance from face-to-face to digital forms of learning, and the big upside of that shift is that many people who had little if any experience with online learning now have a ton of experience. But then some of the downsides are that the balance also tended to tip away from the human interaction that naturally tends to emerge in face-to-face environments. Also, the types of experiences people got—it really didn't offer a whole lot of variety. I'm generalizing, of course. There were many instances of innovation, but there was also a lot of just straight-up Zoom presentations, and I suspect many people are getting a little worn out on the whole pre-recorded sessions with some real-time chat that are becoming the standard for most virtual conferences.

Jeff Cobb (04:45):

And we're seeing learning businesses wrestle with all of this and trying to come to terms with approaches like, say, hybrid conferences and blended learning. But we've still got such a long way to go. Keeping with that unbalanced perspective on things, we also saw more organizations realize that the different opportunities they offer for learning don't exist in neatly defined silos. Conferences, courses, Webinars, publications, even the various forms of free resources and content marketing that organizations offer—all of these are connected, and they have to be balanced with each other. And that became more apparent than ever, for example, as

conferences moved online, and many organizations saw themselves offering very similar content across their portfolio, in those conferences and in their traditional online learning, usually without a lot of intentionality. Now we're going to talk more about this in the next episode, but I think 2022 is definitely going to bring a rebalancing of sorts as learning businesses rethink where and how they deliver different types of experiences and provide different types of value across their portfolios.

Celisa Steele (05:55):

Well, your word, *unbalanced*, reminds me of another word, *koyaanisqatsi*—at least I think that's how it's pronounced.

Jeff Cobb (06:03):

It's amazing that you could be reminded of a word like that.

Celisa Steele (06:06):

It's because of a film from the 1980s that was called *Koyaanisqatsi*, and that's Hopi for "life out of balance." That was an experimental film—it's just images and music. There's no dialogue; there's no narration. And this whole pandemic era feels very experimental too. It's not quite what we'd expect; it's not the usual. And things being out of balance, things being unbalanced, that almost presupposes a rebalancing, at least an attempt to return to balance. I think the next months and years will have to tell us how well we do at getting things back in balance.

Celisa Steele (06:53):

Both of our summations of 2021 learning speak to some of the larger trends impacting learning businesses and therefore learning. Learning always happens in context, and so understanding the context is critical. Let's talk a bit about that broader landscape and the larger trends that shaped 2021 and, really, the few years before 2021 as well.

Jeff Cobb (07:18):

There's some recent-ish developments that have profoundly shaped our understanding of learning and how we can best support it. First among those, I'd say, is neuroscience and the science of learning. They've given us really previously inaccessible insight into what happens to the brain as it learns. And that insight, of course, has helped us identify and understand strategies for learning that are more effective—so things like spaced repetition and effortful retrieval, for example. And we've also come to understand the importance of social and informal learning and how they're responsible for the transference of more skills and knowledge than those formal expert-led sessions that we all put so much time into. And all this has profound implications for the products and services that are provided by learning businesses.

Celisa Steele (08:05):

Then, as a second bigger trend, I'll mention the shifts in human life and work. Humans are living longer in general and working longer, and we're no longer likely to do the same thing over the course of our now longer working lives. We change jobs and even careers more frequently. That's driven in part by technology. We have automation and artificial intelligence, and, in some cases, those are replacing jobs, but, in more cases, they're altering responsibilities as humans use technology to help them do their jobs.

Jeff Cobb (08:42):

And, of course, these shifts in life and work have led to a persistent need for adaptation. That's a topic we've discussed with Heather McGowan in previous episodes of the podcast, and we'll be sure to link to those in the show notes. It's also led to the significant growth of the third sector of education that supplements and, in some cases, even replaces traditional four-year university degrees. Learning businesses are helping the learners they serve upskill, reskill, and generally succeed in a changing world.

Celisa Steele (09:14):

And maybe we should remind folks about what we mean when we say, "the third sector of education."

Jeff Cobb (09:21):

Definitely. It's a very core concept for us. The first sector—and this is the pre-K through high school system that serves our children—and the second sector—which would be higher education that grants degrees to the lucky among us who are in a position to get them—those are well known. The third sector of education may be less familiar, but it's definitely not anywhere near new. The third sector serves the millions of adults who continue to learn and grow in the decades that follow their secondary and post-secondary education.

Celisa Steele (09:52):

Many providers make up the third sector. That third sector includes corporate learning and development efforts. It includes learntech companies. It includes just plain tech companies. We saw recently that Google is the provider of 18 of the 25 most popular new online courses in 2021. Social networking companies—I'm thinking about things like Facebook and LinkedIn—they're also part of the third sector, as are, of course, learning businesses, and that's where we focus our work at Leading Learning. Learning businesses are a key part of that third sector of education, and they include academic continuing education units, training companies, solo edupreneurs, and trade and professional associations. But no matter the type of organization, what learning businesses have in common is that they are all in a market-facing business that sells education and learning products to adults.

Jeff Cobb (10:51):

A couple things I'll add to that. One, I'll mention that we devoted a podcast series, seven episodes in all, to the surge of the third sector, and you'll be able to find a link to that in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode286. Second, I want to say a little bit more about Google being the provider of 18 of the top 25 new online courses. This really is a changing landscape out there if you are in the learning business—and if you're a learner for that matter. Ray Schroeder—who we're going to have on the podcast soon (we've had on the podcast before), always such an intelligent commentator on these types of things—he was the one who called that out for us.

Jeff Cobb (11:30):

I was reading an article he wrote about it, in which he says, well, A, he says there's some positive sides to it, but he also says obviously there's a little bit of a threat here. He notes that to the perspective student, our old tuition-based semester models may not compare well to \$39 a month for six months to gain a credential that 150 major companies are considering the benchmark for entry-level employment. Thirty-nine bucks is what it costs to subscribe to

Coursera, which is the big, massive open online course provider where Google hosts its courses, and it's an average of six months. He's talking in the context of higher education, but everything he's saying applies to learning businesses that serve this third sector we're talking about. In particular, when he makes that comment about a credential that 150 major companies are considering a benchmark, these are companies that say, "Yes, we want that Google credential. If people have it, we're going to hire them."

Jeff Cobb (12:26):

Certificates are a big thing in the third sector, a big thing for learning businesses. But most that I come across have not gotten nearly the level of traction with employers that something like Google's certificate has. And that's usually because not enough rigor has been applied to understanding employer needs. And, as a result, the certificates don't get the level of traction that they could with learners, much less with employers. That's something that's going to have to change about serving this third sector. It's something that's present here in the learning landscape right now. And, with that comment, I'll step down off of my soapbox and stop preaching, and we can return to what we were talking about originally.

Celisa Steele (13:02):

Right, back to the originally scheduled programming. We'll get back to those recent-ish developments that have profoundly shaped the current context for learning businesses. Next, I'd mention just the advances in underlying technologies. I'm thinking about things like the growth of mobile devices—just how many people have mobile devices. I'm thinking about broader Internet availability. I'm thinking about faster Internet, and that's through technologies like 5G. All of these things combined, they mean that more people have the ability to learn anytime, anywhere.

Jeff Cobb (13:36):

Yeah, and it also means newer modalities—and I'm thinking of virtual and augmented reality or even simply things like microlearning—are just likely to become more prevalent as these advances in underlying technologies really start to settle in and take hold. They're going to mean that approaches may need to be rethought. We already know that learning on a smartphone, for example, is different from learning on a desktop, which is different from learning in a classroom. And now we're going to have to deal with how it's going to be different in the metaverse once we're all able to access it.

Celisa Steele (14:05):

Then fourth in terms of these recent-ish developments, I'll mention the surge in content production. It ties to this ubiquity of technology and easy Internet access because that means more people can produce content and make it available. Just as one example, in 2020, YouTube users uploaded 500 hours of video every minute—500 hours of new video being added for every minute. And that's just one type of content (video) on one platform (YouTube). But we're seeing the same surge happening across the Internet. And when you're dealing with that kind of volume of content, it creates issues around discoverability and trustworthiness. How do learners quickly and easily find the most relevant and reliable content?

Jeff Cobb (14:59):

And then fifth and finally, last but far from least, the COVID-19 pandemic has really sharpened the need for many organizations to clarify their strategy, their offerings, and their learntech

needs. The pandemic pushed many organizations to make quick pivots. They had to react in 2020. In 2021, I think we saw efforts of many organizations to get beyond being reactive, to be more proactive, more intentional, and, frankly, more strategic about their learning offerings and the modes that they're using. What stays online? What returns to in-person? And then, critically, why? What are the advantages of each type of delivery and relevance for particular audiences? That reassessment and rebalancing certainly impacted 2021 and will continue this year.

Celisa Steele (15:54):

If you're looking for ways to help your learning business thrive in 2022, we have two new options for you.

Jeff Cobb (16:01):

To help learning businesses, Leading Learning offers a range of complimentary educational resources, including this podcast. Leading Learning's parent company, Tagoras, provides in-depth, customized consulting services to help learning businesses assess their markets, formulate strategy, and select appropriate technologies. We provided relatively little between these two options historically. In 2022, we aim to change that with the launch of two new offerings. If you're looking for a practical, concrete way to help your presenters to deliver more effective, impactful learning experiences, we have a course called "Presenting for Impact" that can help you do just that. If you're looking for a structured, intentional way to make your learning business perform better, the Maturity Accelerator Program is designed to help organizations effectively leverage the Tagoras Learning Business Maturity Model in a way that aligns with their specific situation and needs. If you're interested in either or both of these professional development offerings, check the show notes for this podcast episode to learn more or drop us a note at leadinglearning@tagoras.com.

Celisa Steele (17:08):

With the context and broader trends in mind—and particularly that last point around the pandemic—we're going to turn now to some data we collected via an online survey in late October and early November 2021. We got qualifying responses from 58 organizations, and, given the profound impact of the pandemic on life, work, learning, we asked survey respondents to let us know how COVID-19 has impacted their learning business. We specifically asked respondents if they strongly agreed, agreed, disagreed, or strongly disagreed that the pandemic had impacted their learning business in six areas specifically. We asked about, first, strategy for the learning business; second, the budget for their online offerings, their online education; third, the quantity of their online education; fourth, the quality of their online education; fifth, the kinds or formats of online education they offer; and then, finally, we asked about pricing.

Jeff Cobb (18:15):

The top three areas impacted by the pandemic per the survey were strategy, new online educational formats, and quantity of online education. 44.4 percent of respondents strongly agreed that the pandemic has caused them to create or significantly revise their learning business strategy. We find this promising. It suggests organizations are trying to not be in a purely reactive mode; they're trying to be proactive and craft a strategy that matches this moment and will carry them into a desired future.

Celisa Steele (18:53):

The second area where more than 40 percent of respondents strongly agreed was in response to the statement, “The pandemic has caused us to introduce new, online educational formats.” I don’t find that too surprising. In 2021, many organizations changed in-person conferences or seminars or courses to virtual, and some of them did it for the very first time, which means they added a new format to their portfolio of offerings.

Jeff Cobb (19:22):

More than 40 percent also strongly agreed that the pandemic has caused them to increase the quantity of their online and educational offerings. Again, not too surprising, given that in-person education was impossible or difficult for much of the year, it just makes sense that the amount of online education they offered would go up.

Celisa Steele (19:42):

The fewest respondents strongly agreed that the pandemic has caused them to decrease pricing for at least some of their online educational offerings. Only 9.3 percent agreed that the pandemic has caused them to decrease pricing. I was somewhat surprised by that finding as I heard anecdotally about organizations that cut pricing or even gave things away. What I’m thinking is that organizations did a good making it clear that any pricing breaks were temporary or were in response to the current moment, and so in 2021 they were able to hold pricing steady, even if they’d cut pricing a bit in 2020, back at the beginning of the pandemic.

Jeff Cobb (20:27):

It’s going to be interesting to see if the shift online has a longer-term impact act on the pricing of face-to-face events. You could see it go either way. Online offerings, rightly or wrongly, tend to be priced lower, and that could end up exerting some downward pressure on face-to-face, as people get used to paying less online and then you’re asking them to start paying more when they go back to face-to-face. Or we could easily see the opposite happen. In fact, we could see both of these things happen, but it’ll probably skew one way or the other though. But we could see face-to-face being positioned and priced at a premium because you are getting that human element to it. With respect to pricing and otherwise, in general, it feels like 2021 was the beginning of a great experiment. And it’s far from clear at this point how it’s all going to turn out.

Celisa Steele (21:22):

That’s a look back at 2021. In the next episode, we’re going to turn to 2022 and the year ahead, and we’ll be drawing more on the survey data that we collected.

Jeff Cobb (21:34):

As we said at the outset, now is a typical time for reflection and preparation, so we encourage you to do a year-end review for your learning business. If you had to characterize the past year for your learning business in a few words, what would you say?

Celisa Steele (21:49):

This can be a great group exercise. Have each team member come up with their answer, then share and discuss.

Jeff Cobb (21:56):

And, as part of the discussion, you can elaborate on why you chose the words you chose. What events or examples support your characterization of the year?

Celisa Steele (22:04):

And then what seems worth continuing into the next year, and what might need to be let go?

Jeff Cobb (22:09):

You can find these questions at leadinglearning.com/episode286, along with show notes, additional resources, and options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss new episodes, we encourage you to subscribe. And subscribing also helps us get some data on the podcast.

Celisa Steele (22:26):

We'd also be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts. Jeff and I personally appreciate it, and reviews and ratings help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review and rating.

Jeff Cobb (22:43):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode286, you'll find links to us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (22:53):

Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]