



## Now's the Time: The Year That Is

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 287

Celisa Steele (00:00):

COVID added more and more online content, and online content is inherently more accessible to a broader audience. That means your learners have more options than ever, and your learning business has more competitors than ever. So you'll have to do more to stand out and be heard in this increasingly noisy learning landscape.

Jeff Cobb (00:23):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:30):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:38):

Welcome to episode 287, where we'll talk about what the new year may hold for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele (00:45):

This is a continuation of our discussion in episode 286, which looked back at the year that was. In this episode, we want to focus on the year that is and the opportunities and challenges for learning.

Jeff Cobb (00:58):

To help us do that, we're going to draw on data we collected via an online survey in late October and early November 2021. We received qualifying responses from 58 organizations, and we also had supplemental exchanges with seven survey respondents. We're grateful to them and want to thank Nancy Bacon, Karen Caldwell, Gayle Claman, Jack Coursen, Mona Johnson, Silvia Schroeder, and Scarlett Winters.

Celisa Steele (01:26):

Yes, thank you all very much—and thank you to all the respondents who took time to fill out the online survey as well. We asked survey respondents to let us know which of 14 areas of activities they're either already pursuing, planning to pursue in the year ahead, or not planning to pursue.

Celisa Steele (01:47):

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast  
available at [www.leadinglearning.com/episode287](http://www.leadinglearning.com/episode287).*

These are the 14 areas that we asked about. First, we asked about creation of learning experiences that combine online elements with face-to-face elements. Second, implementation of technologies that leverage artificial intelligence to support or enhance learning. Third, microlearning opportunities. Fourth, providing a personalized learning experience. Fifth, the creation of social or peer-to-peer learning experiences. Sixth, the use of virtual reality or augmented reality to provide new learning experiences or enhance existing experiences. And, seventh, the use of virtual conferences—and we defined a virtual conference as an online event similar to a traditional face-to-face conference, not just a single Webinar.

Jeff Cobb (02:40):

And then the second half of that list, starting with number eight, was new or alternative approaches to credentialing, including certificate programs, microcredentials, and digital badges. Nine was aligning offerings with specific careers or job paths relevant to learners—for example, through a competency model, learning pathways, or a targeted curriculum. Tenth was integration of educational offerings into the learning and development programs of employers in a field or industry or into general workforce development needs. Eleven, development of strategies or tactics to help combat declining enrollments, downward price pressure, or commoditization of educational offerings. Twelve was increased efforts to gather and analyze data to inform new product decisions or improve existing products. Thirteen, increased efforts to gather and analyze data that demonstrates the impact or effectiveness of the learning experiences offered. And then, finally, the last area, number fourteen, implementation of methods to ensure that learning is retained and applied over time.

Celisa Steele (03:52):

That list is a lot to take in just in a single hearing, so we'll make sure to include that list in the show notes for this episode at [leadinglearning.com/episode287](http://leadinglearning.com/episode287). Those 14 areas cover a lot of ground, but there are obviously many other areas we could have asked about, so I think it's important for us to talk a little bit about how we arrived at these 14 areas.

Jeff Cobb (04:17):

We asked about the same 14 area in a 2020 end-of-year survey, and we developed the list back in 2018, when it contained 15 items, the 15th being one about the use of blockchain as an approach to managing learner records, which we dropped when it became clear that nobody was doing that and almost nobody was even thinking about it. That's one we might have to consider adding back in because blockchain is becoming more and more relevant.

Jeff Cobb (04:43):

But, to develop the list originally, we took a modified crowdsourcing approach. We first reached out to thoughtful, smart people, practitioners and experts, those working in learning businesses and the vendors and consultants working with them, and generated a list of trends. And then, folding in our own observations and thoughts, we arrived at the list of 15 originally and 14 now.

Celisa Steele (05:07):

What's top of the list for your learning business to tackle this year? What are your priorities? It might be something in the list of 14 that we mentioned. It might even be that 15th around blockchain. It might be something else entirely. Again, you can find the list in the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode287](http://leadinglearning.com/episode287). Before we share the survey responses on these 14 areas, you

might want to pause—literally hit pause on the podcast—and think about your own priorities. Which of these, if any, are on your radar? Which are you likely to act on in the coming year?

Jeff Cobb (05:52):

Now that you've paused and maybe done some reflecting, I'll share that we saw seven of the 14 areas either being pursued or planning to be pursued in 2022 by roughly 75 percent or more of responding organizations. In first place is the creation of learning experiences that combine online elements with face-to-face elements, with a whopping 92.4 percent of respondents already doing that or planning to in 2022. And I think we see COVID's impact in the growth here and the growing prevalence of blended learning among organizations as people are trying to figure out primarily that relationship between their face-to-face offerings and their online offerings and how that's all going to play out going forward.

Celisa Steele (06:39):

Second in the list of 14 is increased efforts to gather and analyze data to inform new product decisions or improve existing products. A combined 91.5 percent of respondents are either doing that or will be by the end of 2022. And, if you've been listening to the podcast for a while or following our work at Leading Learning, you know that Jeff and I are proponents of the power of marketing—big-picture marketing that goes far beyond just promotion and really starts with product development. Using data to understand what products need to be made and which need to go away and how to improve products, that is just good business practice.

Jeff Cobb (07:24):

Definitely. And now third in the list is microlearning opportunities with 86.5 percent doing it or planning to. While microlearning certainly isn't new at this point, it may finally be hitting maturity. And microlearning has the ability to speak well to some of the current moment's realities. Microlearning also has the potential to address Zoom fatigue and virtual burnout. Microlearning, by definition, requires a shorter online commitment, so it may be more palatable for learners to access microlearning than a Zoom Webinar.

Jeff Cobb (07:58):

And then microlearning also gives you the chance to offer something at a lower price point on your Value Ramp so learners who can't afford a full eight-hour seminar or a course bundle or all-you-can-eat access might still find something of value that they can afford in your portfolio. And, through continued contact with you through that microlearning, they'll be more likely to buy that longer seminar or course bundle from you when they can afford it.

Celisa Steele (08:23):

Again, if you've been listening to us for a while, you will have heard about the Value Ramp before. If that's a new concept to you, we'll make sure to include a link in the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode287](http://leadinglearning.com/episode287), where you can learn more about that Value Ramp, and, Jeff, what you were just talking about, in terms of where microlearning might fit in on the Value Ramp.

Celisa Steele (08:44):

And I do agree that there's an opportunity with microlearning, but I think that learning businesses are going to need to get good at microlearning to really capitalize on the opportunity. You really need to understand how to chunk content and how to craft an actual

learning experience that can take place in a short time and figure out a strategy for microlearning and how it fits into your portfolio of offerings—so to get back to the Value Ramp, being a way to potentially help you see that.

Jeff Cobb (09:17):

Definitely. Now back to the list. Fourth is anti-commoditization efforts, and I'm always glad when I can just say that phrase without stumbling. There was 76.6 percent doing or planning to do something in that arena. And the way we described this in the survey was (I'll quote this) "development of strategies or tactics to help combat declining enrollments, downward price pressure, or commoditization of educational offerings."

Celisa Steele (09:47):

And commoditization concerns—I didn't quite get that that time.

Jeff Cobb (09:50):

It's a tough one.

Celisa Steele (09:53):

But those commoditization concerns and those downward price pressures, those aren't new, especially in highly competitive fields like continuing medical education or continuing legal education, where learning businesses have to compete with free offerings or very cheap all-you-can-eat offerings. But I would say, over the course of 2021, COVID really pumped up the amount of online learning available and the number of virtual conferences. So more learning businesses are trying to figure out how to do online learning and virtual conferences really well and/or how to take a unique approach so that they stand out and don't become a commodity that learners choose—or don't choose—solely based on price.

Jeff Cobb (10:40):

Use of virtual conferences was fifth of the 14 areas that we asked about, with a combined 76.4 percent either already doing it or are going to do it in 2022. Most organizations have had the chance to try virtual conferences by now—or have been forced to try it, in some cases. Some are unconvinced of the value, and they're counting on being able to return to relying on in-person conferences.

Jeff Cobb (11:06):

But, frankly, I think any organization that offers conferences probably should have some virtual conferences in the mix going forward. And, to be honest, that's something we've been saying for a while. We've been researching and issuing reports on virtual conferences since way before they were cool, back in, I think, 2011 was our first one. We've offered them ourselves. We're big believers in them if they're done well. And the shift that we saw in 2020 and 2021 is probably something that's going to stick.

Celisa Steele (11:34):

We'll make sure to include a link to the latest version of our *Virtual Conferences Report* in the show notes to this episode. Sixth in the list is creation of social or peer-to-peer learning experiences. 74.5 percent of respondents are either already doing that or planning it for the year

ahead. And I think the focus on social and peer-to-peer learning makes just a ton of sense in the context of 2022.

Celisa Steele (12:02):

Social learning is incredibly effective, and the pandemic deprived many of us of some of our usual social interactions. And so, in this moment, social and peer-to-peer learning are doubly appealing. They can be very effective learning approaches, and then, by providing learners with some connection to others, there's this added benefit.

Celisa Steele (12:26):

And then, seventh in the list, and this is the last item where about three quarters or more respondents were doing it or planning to do it in the next year, is another data area: increased efforts to gather and analyze data that demonstrates the impact or effectiveness of the learning experiences we offer. 74.4 percent of respondents are either already doing that or planning to in 2022.

Jeff Cobb (12:55):

As you're planning for the year ahead, here are two new options for you to consider.

Celisa Steele (12:59):

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.

Celisa Steele (13:18):

We've 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 deliver more effective, impactful learning experiences, we have a course called "Presenting for Impact" that can help you do just that.

Celisa Steele (13:39):

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.

Celisa Steele (13:55):

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](mailto:leadinglearning@tagoras.com).

Jeff Cobb (14:07):

If you're interested, you can check the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode287](http://leadinglearning.com/episode287) to learn more.

Jeff Cobb (14:18):

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To go along with the survey data, we'll share three trends. Learning businesses that embrace these trends—and act on them—will be well positioned for 2022 and beyond.

Celisa Steele (14:29):

First, learners have greater expectations. The pandemic accelerated a trend that's been in progress for years. COVID added more and more online content, and online content is inherently more accessible to a broader audience. That means your learners have more options than ever, and your learning business has more competitors than ever. So you'll have to do more to stand out and be heard in this increasingly noisy learning landscape.

Jeff Cobb (15:02):

Of course, many organizations made quick pivots and took stopgap measures in 2020 and 2021, as they had to. But while those stopgap measures and shortcuts may have been acceptable or at least understandable—your customers and members were willing to put up with them during the extraordinary times of an emerging pandemic—there's a lot less tolerance for subpar stuff as we move forward. You're going to need to evaluate how you've been putting stuff out there, and think about, "How do we need to do it going forward if we're going to meet these greater expectations?"

Celisa Steele (15:36):

Those greater expectations of learners, those lead naturally to another trend that we're seeing now, and that we predict more of in the year ahead. And we're calling this the Intentionality Imperative. To respond to the greater expectations that learners have, a learning business needs to be more intentional, and that intentionality needs to permeate all levels of what you're doing. It needs to impact the high-level strategy, and it also needs to affect the products. We have to be intentional about what we're designing and developing and how we're delivering those products as well.

Jeff Cobb (16:16):

Arguably, all of the top seven areas of focus for learning businesses per the survey data we shared, speak to getting more intentional. To combine online and face-to-face elements, you have to understand and think through the benefits for the different delivery formats, their strengths and weaknesses, thinking through how to leverage microlearning, when to use virtual conferences, and how to integrate social or peer-to-peer learning.

Jeff Cobb (16:41):

All of these presuppose being more intentional about what approach works when and for whom. And gathering and using data to inform product decisions or improve existing products is definitely a much more intentional approach. And ditto for collecting and using data to demonstrate the impact or effectiveness of your learning products. And then developing strategies or tactics to help combat commoditization takes a focus. It definitely takes being intentional if you're going to pull that off.

Celisa Steele (17:12):

We are heard a lot about increased intentionality in the open-ended comments from survey respondents and in those supplemental exchanges that we had. I know that one survey respondent shared that their organization is going to be specializing in 2022. Pre-pandemic, the

organization offered a fairly broad slate of options, and now what they're doing is refining what they offer, to better align with their expertise.

Celisa Steele (17:40):

Another organization is really focusing efforts on pursuing business-to-business opportunities for the bulk sale of courses and really thinking through what that B2B focus entails—from the staffing (who do you have who can sell those deals?) to the technology (how are you going to deliver those online courses to the organizational customers?), and really thinking through how the organizational customers will make that content available to their end users.

Celisa Steele (18:12):

Another organization was really focused on being intentional about its diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. And they're really focusing on routinizing their DEI efforts, doing the somewhat unexciting, unsexy work to bake it into course proposals and make sure that the DEI efforts don't rely on a single champion.

Celisa Steele (18:35):

And then we also heard from another organization that's really looking at trying to bake in a green or environmental focus into all of its learning, not just courses specifically about the environment or climate change. And, of course, online learning has huge potential in cutting down on the climate impact of learning by reducing the use of planes for travel, for example.

Jeff Cobb (18:57):

We think that the Intentionality Imperative is almost certain to lead to what we're calling the Great Rebalancing. I feel like we need a drum roll for that: the Great Rebalancing. We talked in the last episode about there being unbalance out there. The pandemic pushed many individuals and organizations out of balance. Many went into survival mode. With a focus on intentionality, though, we predict a rebalancing.

Celisa Steele (19:21):

And the rebalancing will mean portfolio changes. We've already touched on the combination of face-to-face and online and trying to figure out what's the right mix there. And we've heard from folks that are working to balance the desire to return to in-person events with the convenience and reach and cost-savings of virtual events. Part of working on that balance means getting clearer on why to gather in person and to make sure that doing so is for some purpose that can't be replicated online.

Celisa Steele (19:57):

And then, in addition to questions of rebalancing face-to-face and online, there are also questions around how much of your portfolio is or should be asynchronous versus synchronous, how much should be broadcast versus participatory. And the goal, of course, is to use each modality, each format, for its strength and combine strength with strength, so that what you're putting out there is the most effective, most powerful learning experience possible.

Jeff Cobb (20:28):

Along those lines, another area to balance is personalized learning versus prescribed pathways. We hear a lot about both of those. Many organizations have to do some work to figure out the

balance of how much to dictate (how much to prescribe) and how much to leave open-ended for the learner to discover and pursue herself. That question of how much to personalize and how much to prescribe, that can be tricky, especially if you're in a highly regulated field.

Celisa Steele (20:58):

And then a last big area that needs rebalancing in many organizations is meetings versus education. This is a tension that predates the pandemic, but the pandemic exacerbated it. Many learning businesses offer both meetings and conferences, on the one hand, and then educational products, like courses, on the other. Often different groups in the organization manage those—and manage them separately.

Celisa Steele (21:27):

Historically, for many organizations, those meetings and conferences were in-person. Then COVID moved those online. And so now, within an organization, the amount of content jumped hugely, and learners are sometimes left trying to sort out the difference between an online course and a recording of a conference session on the same topic. If learning businesses don't figure that out, if they don't help learners understand the options, then they risk cannibalization. A learner who historically went to the annual meeting *and* bought some online courses may wind up doing one or the other but not both.

Jeff Cobb (22:07):

It's an interesting area because, when folks talk about cannibalization, it's usually in the context of worrying that a virtual conference is going to hurt in-person attendance if you're offering both in-person and virtual. That's where we've heard the most about this in the past, and there's a lot of data that says that that kind of cannibalization is really a myth—it doesn't play out. But it strikes us that the virtual event content really could cannibalize online course content if learning businesses don't do the work to become more intentional about what they're offering and do that work to rebalance.

Jeff Cobb (22:46):

As a silver lining from the pandemic, I think we're seeing organizations do more cross-departmental work—so both meetings and education folks get together to talk about technology or discuss a content strategy. And, of course, that's really going to need to continue, that kind of coordination that's going to prevent this sort of cannibalization that we're talking about here.

Celisa Steele (23:12):

Now, we didn't ask about barriers explicitly in the online survey, but, in those follow-on exchanges that we had with some respondents, we did ask about barriers that they're either hitting or anticipate hitting as they try to pursue their plans for 2022. In almost all of those exchanges, the answer basically boils down to one word: *capacity*. Specifically, they were talking about technology and people.

Jeff Cobb (23:40):

On the technology side, they're often looking for a solution to help them with a strategic goal. For example, a platform that allows not only B2C sales (business-to-consumer sales, direct to learners) but also facilitates the B2B, organizational sales model as well. Or a platform that automates a subscription model for learners so they're automatically charged each year. Or



technology with good artificial intelligence that can help them really personalize learning. So they have a specific vision and need, but they're struggling to find the right technology at the right price point to support whatever that vision is.

Celisa Steele (24:20):

On the people side, we're experiencing what is called the Great Resignation, and many learning businesses are dealing with being down a team member or even two. They're struggling to do everything they have to do with fewer resources. And then, of course, there's really fierce competition as they look to hire in team members with the needed skills and knowledge and mindset.

Jeff Cobb (24:47):

Of course, the knowledge and the mindset are changing because of everything we've been talking about here, all of the shifts that have occurred over 2020 and 2021. So you might need different people on the bus than you had before. You might have lost some people on the bus, unfortunately, along the way. So I think there's going to be a lot of focus both on technology and people and trying to get the right pieces in place to, as we've been saying, to be more intentional, to do the work that's going to help with that Great Rebalancing. You've got to have the capacity to do that. And I think that's just going to be so, so important in 2022.

Celisa Steele (25:23):

And here's another place to pause and think about your own learning business. What barriers are you hitting or do you anticipate hitting as you try to deliver on your plans for the year ahead?

Jeff Cobb (25:36):

And the idea here is to be forewarned or really being forewarned is being forearmed, I guess, is how the saying goes. And so, if you know what challenges you're likely to encounter, then you'll be better able to deal with them when and if they arise.

Celisa Steele (25:59):

That's a look ahead at the year to come. The turning of a calendar from one year to the next is a natural time for reflection and preparation, so we encourage you to think about and talk as a team about your learning business's priorities for the year.

Jeff Cobb (26:14):

And don't shy away from also talking about those likely barriers. By unearthing those, you can better address them.

Celisa Steele (26:21):

You can find show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode287](http://leadinglearning.com/episode287). That will include a recap of the data we shared, some additional resources, and options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss it when we release new episodes, we encourage you to subscribe, and subscribing also helps us get some data on how the podcast is doing.

Jeff Cobb (26:43):

We'd also be grateful if you take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcast. Celisa and I personally appreciate that, and those reviews and ratings help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Just go to [leadinglearning.com/apple](http://leadinglearning.com/apple) to leave a review and rating.

Celisa Steele (27:02):

Last, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode287](http://leadinglearning.com/episode287), you'll find links to us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (27:12):

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

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](http://www.danosongs.com)]*