Relevant, Efficient, and Economical: Learning Touchstones with Ray Schroeder

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 288

Ray Schroeder (00:00):

And we do have to be relevant, efficient, and economical. Those are the three touchstones: relevant, efficient, and economical. We can't sustain $1.7 trillion in student debt. We need to make this affordable, and we've got to do it efficiently. And we have to respect the learner's time.

Jeff Cobb (00:28):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:29):

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

Celisa Steele (00:38):

Welcome to episode 288 of the Leading Learning Podcast, which features a conversation with return guest Ray Schroeder. Ray Schroeder is professor emeritus and senior fellow at the University of Illinois Springfield and also senior fellow for UPCEA, the University Professional and Continuing Education Association. Jeff and Ray discuss COVID's indelible impact on teaching and learning, the metaverse, blockchain, non-fungible tokens, artificial intelligence, teaching ahead, and how Google's wildly popular certificates make the case for relevant, efficient, economical learning going forward. As a leading expert in online education, Ray brings his unmatched knowledge and passion to the conversation. Jeff spoke with Ray in December 2021.

Jeff Cobb (01:35):

One of the things I remember distinctly about you at this point is you were a featured speaker at our Learning • Technology • Design virtual conference in 2020. And that was in February. So it was right before everything really hit with COVID and the pandemic. I think you were really the first person I heard speak about how this was going to have an impact on the world of education, generally, the world of continuing education, professional development. And it did, obviously. It had a huge impact.

Jeff Cobb (02:10):

I'm wondering now, rolling forward close to two years, from your perspective, what if anything has this whole COVID era changed about how we should now be thinking about lifelong learning, continuing education, both from the perspective of being an individual that has to do that but also from the perspective of organizations that support lifelong learning and continuing education?

Ray Schroeder (02:36):

Well, that's a great and large question. Certainly COVID was an inflection point for all of us in the learning area. It was rather than bringing those learners to us, whether it's our branch office in Atlanta or if it's a corporate office in New York, we might bring in our employees and train them, or a university might bring students, of course, to the campus. Instead, it's bringing the learning to the learners. And so that training has changed in delivery mode. And we're going to see future changes. That's something we'll be talking about, I'm sure. But COVID was that inflection point. It really changed the whole landscape because we were so face-to-face-centric, and we now have become distant-centric, and we're reaching out directly to those who receive the learning from us.

Jeff Cobb (03:39):

Do you think it's at this point changed people's expectations of online learning significantly? I mean, one of my operating theories at this point is you have an awful lot of people who either weren't doing much or weren't doing any online learning before all of this hit suddenly got forced into it, now have quite a bit of experience with different types of online education opportunities and may have a different level of expectation around what they should be getting from that.

Ray Schroeder (04:08):

Absolutely. I think that the changes are not only in the technological delivery mode, but also it's in the convenience and facility that the learners have found because some of it can be asynchronous. It can be repeated. You can go back. You can go at double speed in some cases. So it gives you flexibility over the delivery of content and the reception of content, and it allows you to go back. You might come back with a big folder from a training and go through that folder with pages falling out—you know what it looks like, and those six PowerPoints per page images are really difficult. But if you can go to a Web site and, click, click, bring it right up in pristine form, it's really advantageous. And so as we develop, as we move toward what we call, loosely, the Fourth Industrial Revolution, we have access, and we have instant video, audio, and data access. I think that's a substantive change. I think most all learners appreciate it. And most of them appreciate particularly the opportunity to do it anyplace, anytime.

Jeff Cobb (05:36):

I wonder what you're hearing from, I guess, in your world it would be primarily a faculty sort of perspective. In my world, we tend to talk more about the sort of subject matter experts, the presenters, the facilitators, but the people who are responsible for delivering and facilitating these online education experiences. What's your perception of how well teachers have risen to the occasion, and what are they still struggling with in this world where online is now a permanent, really a majority, feature at this point? It may balance out some as we go forward, but most teaching is having to happen online. How are teachers doing with that?

Ray Schroeder (06:15):

Well, it certainly has changed from the beginning. A brief anecdote. I had an e-mail from a good friend who directed the online operation at a Big Ten university in 2020. It was in March. It was just two days before spring break began, and he said, "Oh my, I just got an e-mail from our provost. We're not coming back. We have 8,000 on-time campus classes. What are we going to do? We have 10 days." And he was not in a panic, but you could hear in his voice this is a daunting, daunting project. And so, so many of us, both in the corporate world and in the academic world, had to adapt because we had scheduled these trainings, and now we weren't going to do them face to face.

Ray Schroeder (07:09):

What we found, generally, was that evaluation of quality and responsiveness was not very high. And, in fact, we used to call it—we still do—we call it "remote teaching" rather than "online learning" because where was the instructional design? Where was the development of these materials? For that first semester, it wasn't very good. It was a little better in the fall and even better now, in the spring of this year and in the fall of this year. During that time, those subject matter experts and those faculty adapted, and we were able to bring them along in a rather rapid fashion. But it's really to the credit of the instructional designers, the developers, the video experts in all of our shops who did this in a way that they were able to bring along and develop people who weren't used to this kind of change.

Jeff Cobb (08:11):

What do you think the biggest hurdle for your average faculty member is when they have to go online and be in, whether it's a Zoom environment or whatever it is, instead of standing in front of that classroom?

Ray Schroeder (08:23):

Well, I recall because this happened to me albeit 25 years ago, but, for the first, roughly half of my academic career, I taught in person. I literally had lecture notes that had changed to yellow over a couple of decades because I was teaching from those old lecture notes. And then to go to this format, there's a piece of vanity if you're going to use video, and we have to help the subject matter experts get past that and understand that they want authenticity. They don't want—you're not a model. They want you to be authentic. So that's one piece.

Ray Schroeder (09:09):

Second is there are so many of our experts who are concerned about their lack of technological expertise, and they feel they've got to do it all. Generally, that's not the case. Generally, we are supporting them. We have an infrastructure at our corporation, at our campus, that helps them with the video, helps them and provides them with tools so they can do both synchronous and asynchronous in a comfortable way.

Ray Schroeder (09:41):

So it's anxiety. Many times you see people saying, "Oh, I could never do that. That won't work. It just won't work." And yet it does. It works very well. But when you probe beyond what they say to what they mean is, "I'm afraid. I'm fearful of doing this." And, "Help me." And when you do help them, then you become fast friends, and it works well for everybody.

Celisa Steele (10:13):

If you're looking for ways to support those you work with and serve, we have two offerings that can help. 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 (10:38):

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. 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 (11:15):

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. See the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode288 to learn more. Now, back to Jeff's conversation with Ray.

Jeff Cobb (11:38):

Now we've been touching on this loosely in the conversation so far, but obviously there's a huge technological component at the core of this. They're the technologies that we've all gotten familiar with at this point, like Zoom—we're using Zoom right now to record this. People have become familiar with that, but that's obviously not the limit of what can happen online. And we're seeing things emerge now that really could be transformative. And I know this is something you write about—things like the metaverse and what blockchain is making possible. Could you talk a little bit about your perspective on the technological changes that are impacting and that are going to continue to impact professional continuing online education?

Ray Schroeder (12:20):

Yes, certainly. The technology marches forward, and, in some cases, it hearkens back. I recall it was in 2005, '06, and '07 that I worked with a product from Linden Lab that recently has been bought out by a group of investors. It may have a different name now. But they had what was called Second Life. And it was a metaverse, 3D environment. We had used that for delivery of class sessions, if you will, and we had students become avatars. I recall building within the metaverse a virtual building. In my case, it was a student union, where people could come in and view a video. So there'd be a video screen there, and it looked like maybe a cartoon but a good representation of a video screen, and these various avatars would gather there and interact with one another and pause the video and have a conversation and rewind and say, "See, look here—this is what happened." And they were able to control the medium as well as the conversation.

Ray Schroeder (13:33):

The metaverse now has moved on, and, you may have read, I mentioned my 10-year-old grandson who is very much into Roblox and Minecraft. Even at 10 years old, our children are using metaverse environments to interact, to play games, and to build things. And that really is

good. It's exciting because they continued to advance while we tended to pause on the metaverse, waiting for improved, lower-latency transmission through 5G or 10G on cable or satellite communication. The latency issue is one in which, when you say something or take a step or issue a command, it's the amount of time for that to get to the core computer and then come back to you. If you have high latency, like old 4G technology, and if you used goggles, you might trip, or you might feel a little nauseous because you walk and things are lagging behind you.

Ray Schroeder (14:47):

In this case, we now have delivery technologies to the mobile learner that will—and the office learner—that will allow us to have true low-latency engagements. That technology makes a huge difference. And for us, for those in higher ed, it means you can use a chemistry lab. You can physically pick up a beaker and titrate a solution. And for those of us in industry, we can do tactile, hands-on kinds of trainings that we couldn't really do in the past. Students and employees can have their hands in gloves. They can feel what it feels like. They can go through an operation and do it again and again and again. One of the more important areas, at least in my advanced age, is in the medical profession, where we see residents, surgical residents, go through a simulated surgery in this kind of an environment once or twice, and then they step into the surgery suite and do it on you. I welcome that kind of experience.

Jeff Cobb (16:09):

I love your perspective because I feel like—you've written about this, and I agree with it—that, at least in terms of the ability to deliver those experiences and participate in those experiences, we seem to be at a real tipping point, mainly because the bandwidth is now there, the hardware is there, we can do this, and it can really feel like a realistic experience. The pushback that I always get from any organization I talk to is on the creation side. Being able to create these experiences, it feels labor-intensive. It feels expensive. Most of them are just daunted by that, scared by that. Do you see that changing? Are we at a tipping point on that yet, or is that still coming?

Ray Schroeder (16:48):

We are at a tipping point in the coding, and we have facilitated coding into the equivalent of a word processor. You say what you want to do, and then it gives you the code for that. Again, forgive me, but my 10-year-old grandson was just showing me—I've got a bouncing ball, and we're looking at gravity and the inclination of this platform. So how would it bounce? I can do this and this and this, and now I can make it bounce, and I can bounce it back. Here's a fifth-grader, and he's doing this for fun. Of course I think he's great—there are hundreds of thousands, millions of fifth-graders who can do the same thing.

Ray Schroeder (17:39):

As we're educating and growing these youth in this environment, as developers of their own building games, they're motivated to build games because they get that reinforcement. They love the immersion. We're seeing that change. It's interesting because Minecraft and Roblox are two of the older 3D environments, and yet they are right on the cutting edge. They are ready to take a leadership role as we apply this to business.

Jeff Cobb (18:15):

And I think Roblox is actually creating educational-type experiences now. Correct? Yeah. The metaverse is one part of this, and I'm personally fascinated by how it all turns out. As I think you noted in one of your recent articles, this originally came out of *Snow Crash*—Neal Stephenson talking about this as a term. I love that book. I love the way he describes the metaverse, and this was decades ago that he was talking about this. I'm wondering if it's going to be like that, if it's really going to be that immersive and sort of slipping in and out of virtual and real world. And nobody knows at this point, I guess. Crystal ball on that. But the impact of that obviously could be huge, no matter what form this ultimately takes.

Jeff Cobb (19:00):

The other trend—or another trend because there many out there right now—that I wanted to be sure to get you to comment on is blockchain and the emergence of blockchain and some of the technologies around that. I know specifically you've recently written some about NFTs, or non-fungible tokens, and DAOs, decentralized autonomous organizations. Could you talk a little bit about what those are and how you see them potentially having an impact?

Ray Schroeder (19:28):

Absolutely. One of my good friends is Rovy Branon. He's associate provost, as I recall, at the University of Washington, and we were having a discussion, and it was face to face, so it probably was two years ago. But he had read the book about life expectancy and the expectation that one might live a hundred years on standard, that medicine may get us that. Of course, we didn't have COVID yet at that time, but still. And he said, "This gives rise to what several of us are calling the 60-year learner, and so we see a whole long period of time of continuing education and that professional education is taking place in our jobs and as we change careers. And so we're seeing this whole development."

Ray Schroeder (20:23):

Well, now pause there for just a second. Step back to college, where if you graduate or not, you get a transcript. The college owns that transcript, and that's wrong. That is absolutely wrong. The student earned those credits, took those courses, and so a university might block you getting that transcript because you have parking fees due. Well, that's absolutely wrong. So one of the concepts that MIT championed a few years ago was beginning to put the transcript on the blockchain. As that moved forward, we saw concurrent development of non-fungible tokens, which could represent what you have created and validate that's yours. And that could be an internship, could be a course taken at your place of work or elsewhere. And those should be under the control of the learner. The learner ought to be able to assemble these together in a way that they can be used by HR, perspective employers, as they're looking at hiring you among others.

Ray Schroeder (21:42):

And so I think we see this really growing and continuing to grow. I see it on the blockchain probably with NFTs. And it could be that HR might use DAOs, D-A-Os, to sort through all those portfolios and choose the ones that have the proper NFTs that they're seeking.

Ray Schroeder (22:08):

I see this unfolding. I'm not sure what chain it's going to take—maybe across chains. We're really at the beginning part of this development. But the key thing is that control, validation, certification of your learning belongs to you, and you will be able to present them in proper

context, validated by the blockchain. I think this is an important step as we move forward. And I really think that we're going to find so many employers using, for efficiency sake and reach sake, using the blockchain, especially because more and more employees are preferring to work from home and not changing. It may be the ideal employee for you may be in Guam, and yet they're virtually there with you, if you will, but you don't know about them because you only advertised in the New York publications.

Jeff Cobb (23:17):

It seems like an interesting corollary to this, or something that flows out of it, is the role of the learner herself and, in essence, the responsibility of the learner herself because, as you said, you're embarking on this 60 years that these days or at least in coming days, people are going to have to navigate a little bit differently than they have before because you're talking about accumulating all of these, essentially, credentials along the way, but they may be less formal than the types of credentials that we think of right now, or they emerge a little more organically than the way credentials do now. And you're basically creating this track record, that you're carrying throughout your career, of the learning that you've done and the verification of that learning. I suspect most people don't really think about their life and their learning and their careers that way now, and we need to prepare people for this, it seems like.

Ray Schroeder (24:14):

Jeff, you're absolutely right. One of the data points that I commonly cite surprises many people, and it is that the average tenure of an American worker—and this is before the Great Resignation—the average tenure with an employer is just four years. Every four years, if we're changing employers, we need to validate ourselves all over, and we probably need new credentials. We probably need professional ed, continuing ed, to develop ourselves into the new position.

Ray Schroeder (24:50):

And so how do we keep that trail moving in a linear fashion and that we don't drop pieces along the way? And this is it. We create, if you will, our folder that we cultivate, that we curate, with all those educational experiences. We certainly include all the trainings and courses and whatnot and internships, but we also add those personalized experiences that add to that. Maybe we did something for a nonprofit along the way. In any event, this is something new for all of us to begin to curate.

Jeff Cobb (25:37):

And it seems like it might finally be a really strong basis for competency-based education, which has been a low-level buzz for I don't know how long in academia and, to a certain extent, in the association world but never really seems to fully come to fruition. But this, it seems like, would be strong support structure for that.

Ray Schroeder (25:57):

Absolutely. Jeff Selingo recently wrote a column on the very topic—are we finally ready for competency-based education? I mean, we should be. We must be. The best learner is doing it. The best way we learn, most of us learn, is by doing, and by being successful in doing that.

Jeff Cobb (26:26):

And it seems like another corollary or extension of what's being made possible, particularly by something like blockchain, in my mind, is that the major players in lifelong learning are probably going to have to think a little bit differently and, I think, more collaboratively than they potentially have in the past. Because you've typically had a siloed environment, where you've got businesses, corporations, maybe doing training in a certain way, maybe bringing in commercial training or having internal L&D, so they're working with their employees to do that. You've got higher education, academia, that's providing different takes on continuing education, lifelong learning. You've got trade and professional associations, who are often providing certification paths and CE to support certifications and those sorts of things. But there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of conversation between those groups, in my experience, or coordination or trying to think comprehensively about how it can work together to address the need for workplace learning, the upskilling, the reskilling, the career paths of the people that they all want to serve.

Jeff Cobb (27:31):

What's your per perspective on that?

Ray Schroeder (27:34):

It's interesting because I recently wrote about the Google Career Certificate programs. Phenomenally successful. Google has really cracked the nut on this. They have six career certificates that they're offering, $39 a month through Coursera for an average of six months to complete six courses at 10 hours a week. And so that's a huge piece, when the millions, I'll say, more than a million have already enrolled in various of the six certificate programs, Career Certificate programs. What we're finding is that probably the most unique and the important piece is Google has assembled 150 corporations that have agreed to accept the Google certificates as the benchmark for entry-level positions. And they've even created portals to directly apply, so those who get a certificate directly can apply to any of these 150, and they're ranked right up there. And, in the case of Google, they consider it the equivalent of a degree.

Ray Schroeder (28:52):

Now some in higher ed, in my raising, writing about this, and discussion, some discussion has arisen in higher ed saying, "Oh yeah, but you know, we need a little bit of context. We need some liberal arts." But nothing precludes this from being integrated into formal education. And, in fact, Google has offered it free to the nearly 2,000 community colleges in the United States. And charging that $39 when tuition starts at $150, probably, even at most community colleges, up to $500 or a $1,000 for one credit hour. And, on top of all of that, ACE, the American Council on Education, has recommended that academic credit be given for these certificates.

Ray Schroeder (29:50):

So all of this is coming together, and we do have to partner, and we do have to be relevant, efficient, and economical. Those are the three touchstones: relevant, efficient, and economical.

Ray Schroeder (30:06):

We can't sustain $1.7 trillion in student debt. We need to make this affordable, and we've got to do it efficiently. And we have to respect the learner's time. And what Google is proposing is certainly doable, and it can be integrated. So I see that we can integrate these into other corporate training. You could say, "Well, we really like your data analytics certificate. We'd like to add our own one or two. So complete that, and we've got a capstone specific to our

corporation, to our learning, and once you complete that, we put you at the top of our employment list."

Jeff Cobb (30:50):

Relevant, efficient, economical. I think that's a great mantra there. We might have the title for this episode in those three words. Certainly, great advice. One of the things that really struck me about the Google story, when you wrote about this, because you'd made that comment about $39, average of six months, but then that they have these 150 major companies that are really considering it a benchmark. Clearly, Google had made an effort to understand what those companies need and to deliver that in the form of this certificate that they're providing. And I just don't see that often enough in working with organizations that are offering certificates. They create the certificate because it sounds like a good idea, but they haven't really figured out if that's aligning with what an employer is going to value. And that's at a minimum. I think that's one of those points of conversation that needs to improve going forward.

Ray Schroeder (31:42):

Jeff, you're right. One of the things I've also written about, that I fear, too often we in higher ed teach through the rearview mirror. We teach what happened—three years, five years. If we use a textbook, it's two years old before it's in our hands. We're teaching things behind us. We're not teaching ahead, and that's what we need to do. And I think that's what Google gets, and that's what employers get. And that's what employees need to receive.

Jeff Cobb (32:18):

Well, we've been giving a good bit of it—or you've been giving a good bit of it, as we've been going along. "It" being advice that I think learning businesses should live by. But, if you had to offer in conclusion here one piece of advice for organizations that are in that business of continuing education, professional development, lifelong learning, what do they really need to be doing now to ensure that they're going to thrive in the coming year and beyond?

Ray Schroeder (32:45):

I think they lean to what we just said. We are in a fast-moving river. The current is very fast, and there are rapids ahead in this Fourth Industrial Revolution. We need to understand blockchain, where we're going. We need to understand AI, and I think AI is the biggest technology for all of us that we're going to see so much moving forward, as far as AI tutors, AI assistance, AI instructors, constantly adapting and forward-looking. I would say all of our units need to be forward-looking. Don't teach to today. Teach to tomorrow.

Celisa Steele (33:39):

A senior fellow at both the University of Illinois Springfield and the University Professional and Continuing Education Association, Ray Schroeder is a leading expert in online education. You can learn more about his work and find links to the many articles and columns he's written—and continues to write—and the reading lists he curates at rayschroeder.com. You can also find him on LinkedIn and Twitter. Ray brings decades of experience and insight to the work he shares, and we highly recommend following him.

Jeff Cobb (34:09):

Indeed, we do. We're big followers of Ray ourselves, and he is a fantastic resource for those learning businesses that want to be forward-looking. At leadinglearning.com/episode288, you'll find a link to Ray's Web site, full show notes, and a transcript and other resources.

Celisa Steele (34:25):

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Jeff Cobb (34:37):

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

Celisa Steele (34:53):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. At leadinglearning.com/episode288, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (35:03):

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

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