



Beyond Content: Improving Your Presenters

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 291

Jeff Cobb (00:00):

You have to offer the essential content your learners need and desire. But that's just table stakes. Content alone is not enough to stand out from competitors or to ensure you'll be effective. To ensure your offerings are effective, you have to up your game. And one obvious way to do that is by helping your subject matter experts be better teachers and presenters. I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:28):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:37):

In today's episode, number 291, we're going to talk about upping your learning business's game by improving the efficacy and impact of the experts you use.

Celisa Steele (00:47):

And when we talk about experts, we're using that as an umbrella term that encompasses the subject matter experts, the presenters, and the faculty that your learning business likely relies on. But we're going to use the term *subject matter expert* or *S-M-E* or *SME* mostly. Now, admittedly not all learning businesses rely on external experts, but in our experience most do rely on them at least some. These are the people who develop and/or deliver some of the learning experiences that you offer to learners.

Jeff Cobb (01:21):

And when we say learning experiences, we're thinking about conference sessions, classes and seminars, self-paced e-learning, real time Webinars, tests and examinations, and more. Often to develop or deliver learning, a learning business needs to involve and enlist people beyond its internal team because it needs the authority and knowledge and skills that these outside experts bring to the specific domains addressed in learning experiences.

Celisa Steele (01:48):

But the knowledge and skills those subject matter experts bring are rarely in the field of andragogy, andragogy being the theory of adult learning popularized by Malcolm Knowles. These SMEs know some topic or topics of importance to the field, profession, or industry your learning business serves, but that doesn't mean they're experts in the science of adult learning.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode291.*

Jeff Cobb (02:13):

Yeah. In fact, they may not even be familiar with the science of adult learning. They may never have heard of andragogy because, odds are, that's not why you sought them out. You sought them out for their expertise and experience in a different domain, in their domain of specialty. If you serve radiologists, then you might engage SMEs that help develop content around lung cancer screening using computed tomography of the chest. If you serve home builders, then you might enlist electricians or plumbers or architects as subject matter experts to provide targeted information about some aspect of construction. But, again, it's unlikely that those SMEs will know both about chest CTs and andragogy. And most providers of learning in our experience really haven't thought enough about the implications of that.

Celisa Steele (03:04):

To give an example ripped from the pages of my own past, I was hired as a French teaching assistant when I started graduate school at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Now in some departments, teaching assistants are truly that—they assist a full professor. In the sciences, that might mean that a full professor teaches the big main class, what's traditionally been lecture-based (and I hope we talk more about lecture in a bit), and then the teaching assistant leads a lab, a smaller group of students who meet and get to try out hands-on experiments. Well, it didn't work that way in the Romance Languages Department. In Romance Languages, being a teaching assistant meant that I was singularly responsible for a section of French I. I had an assigned textbook, but I was responsible for lesson plans and quizzes and activities. And do you know how I got that job, Jeff?

Jeff Cobb (04:03):

Well, I definitely have some guesses, but I'll just ask. How?

Celisa Steele (04:07):

By recording, on a cassette tape, me reading a prescribed text in French. It was just a few minutes long, maybe even only two minutes long. Then presumably someone listened to that tape that they received via the US mail, looked at my college transcript of French classes, I had some study abroad, and that was sufficient to get me hired. UNC hired me based on domain knowledge. They treated me like a subject matter expert. They hired me to teach, and they had no idea if I could teach. They made the assumption that if I knew French, I could teach French, which seems like a dangerous assumption to make. I know I can think of many, many situations in which someone who's really good at something has actually been of no help at all to me in learning how to do that thing.

Jeff Cobb (05:00):

I'm right with you there. I had a very similar experience, multiple experiences actually, at the same institution of being, as you noted, put up in front of a classroom with the assumption that you've got the experience and the domain to do it. I'm not even sure they really checked that in my instance. But I had the experience in language. I had experience in literature, which are the topics that I was teaching. But, like you, I really had no experience, had not been educated at all in the science of learning of how to teach adults, young adults in that case. So thank you to all those students who put up with me and, I hope, learned something in the process all those years ago.

Celisa Steele (05:40):

I think one of the flaws of assuming that because someone knows something they know how to teach it is that a lot of us have actually had subpar learning experiences. I mentioned the big lecture class, and that's definitely been a staple in higher education and even K12 for a long, long time. I do feel like there's been some progress more recently to make learning more experiential, more personalized, using tech tools or project-based learning, where learners get to choose projects. But I still think there's an awful lot of pure lecture, which we know isn't as effective as more targeted and more interactive experiences.

Jeff Cobb (06:24):

Yeah. And not to knock the lecture completely because there are definitely good lectures and bad lectures. And I think we tend to throw the baby out with the bath water in condemning all lectures. But it's still true that, on the whole, we know that more learner engagement means more retention, and retention is essential if the learner's going to apply what she's learned, actually take that, the information, the knowledge that's shared in whatever the type of learning experience it is, and actually take that back into her life and take it back into her work and make something happen with it, which, just too often, is not the result with a lot of the continuing education and professional development experiences that we see the average subject matter expert put together.

Celisa Steele (07:11):

Well, yeah. And you make a good point about they're definitely being good lectures as well as bad lectures. There are whole businesses built around good lectures. You spoke with Steven Schragis of One Day University, and obviously they've built a business around good lectures. And I think there's an issue too that just knowing that projects and activities are maybe more engaging or better than pure lecture, that still doesn't necessarily mean that the learning experience will be that much more effective because, just as there are good and bad lectures, there are good and bad activities. And I'm guessing that most listeners can think of at least one time—if not a whole slew of times—where they've been asked to complete some activity during a session or in a class, but that activity didn't really contribute to their learning.

Jeff Cobb (08:00):

Yeah. One that I hear people kind of groan and complain about all the time, if you're in the halls of a conference talking to people about sessions, is what I characterize as the traditional "discuss among yourselves" group activity, where the presenter lobbs the topic out there and says, "Have some discussion about this at your table." But there's no real clear purpose. No real structure or goals have been set around that discussion, no guidance as to how the learners might take whatever the topic is and, again, apply it back into their lives. That's certainly the implication, what the presenter wants the people in the room to do, but how to get them to do that, to give them the path to doing that just really isn't presented.

Jeff Cobb (08:45):

And so you get people sitting around, talking for a little bit, and then twiddling their thumbs and staring at the ceiling. Or maybe one person dominating the conversation is probably the most typical thing that happens. But whether any actual learning comes out of that type of activity—mostly people just learn to hate that type of activity.

Celisa Steele (09:02):

Well, I think that type of activity also has been showing itself in the virtual realm as well. I think the breakout rooms, people think, “Oh, well, Zoom Webinar, isn’t interactive enough. We’re going to have breakout rooms for discussion.” But, again, if it’s not structured, if you aren’t actually giving people thought-provoking questions and time to reflect and then get them to engage, it really can just fall absolutely flat and be no more effective than pure lecture. And so to kind of sum up what we’ve been talking about, not only do subject matter experts likely not have training in adult learning theory, they’re likely to draw on their own experience in school and then in other learning situations when they’re trying to develop or deliver their own content. And those examples from their own experience may not be worth copying. The problem with SMEs starts in K12 education. Think about that algebra teacher who knows all the equations but doesn’t know how to interest or engage their high school students in the class.

Jeff Cobb (10:08):

You see that kind of thing all the time. And part of the issue there may be what’s typically called the curse of knowledge. Often we get caught up in that ourselves without realizing it. If you are the expert in front of the classroom, you know your stuff. You have a tendency to think that other people are maybe not as far along as you are, but that they’re further along than they probably are. Even simple things like when I’m speaking at times to groups, and I’ll just throw out the acronym LMS or for that matter SME and just assume that the people in the room know that. Well, that’s part of my everyday life. I talk about those things all the time. You can’t assume even that other people who are in the learning business are necessarily throwing around those acronyms all the time. It may take them a minute to catch up, or some may be new to it and have never heard it at all.

Jeff Cobb (10:56):

But I’m just assuming everybody’s with me as I go on talking about learning management systems, which is what an LMS would be, or subject matter experts, which is what an SME would be. I know that. I need to make sure that the people that I’m trying to instruct know that as well.

Celisa Steele (11:11):

Right. And that curse of knowledge is that if you’re an expert in a field, you don’t even realize how much you know. It’s become second nature to yourself. You don’t even realize how far back you have to go and how basic you have to get. You really have to have a beginner’s mind if you really want to teach. And that can be hard, to set aside all the years of experience and study if you’re an expert and really get down to, “Okay, how do I explain this to a beginner?” So all of what we’ve been talking about is really the current situation. Learning businesses often rely on subject matter experts to develop and deliver learning products. But those SMEs probably don’t know how to develop and deliver products in ways that align with brain science and adult learning principles.

Jeff Cobb (12:00):

And there’s a big problem with that situation for learning businesses, organizations whose existence depends on providing effective learning. You have to offer the essential content your learners need and desire. But that’s just table stakes. Content alone is not enough to stand out from competitors or to ensure you’ll be effective. To ensure your offerings are effective, you have to up your game. And one obvious way to do that is by helping your subject matter experts be better teachers and presenters.

Celisa Steele (12:33):

Good learning technology is also important in ensuring your offerings are effective.

Jeff Cobb (12:39):

Web Courseworks is a learning technologies company with an ever-evolving learning management system, CourseStage. CourseStage LMS is leveraged by organizations of all sizes to build a learning business and track education outcomes for proven success. Download the Web Courseworks guide “Four Ways an LMS Can Help Build a Revenue-Generating Learning Business,” and learn how your organization can leverage a learning management system to generate revenue for your learning practice. Get the guide at webcourseworks.com/four-lms-revenue-models.

Celisa Steele (13:16):

We encourage you to check out Web Courseworks, and you can find a link to the guide “Four Ways an LMS Can Help Build a Revenue-Generating Learning Business” in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode291.

Jeff Cobb (13:34):

So that’s the situation and the problem. But, of course, where there are problems, there are very often opportunities.

Celisa Steele (13:40):

True enough. And there is an opportunity here, and it’s one that you and we have been talking about for a number of years now.

Jeff Cobb (13:49):

Yeah, that’s true. Going back more than a decade with our consulting experience, one of the initiatives that we’ve typically recommended to organizations, particularly those that are delivering learning as part of events, online or off, is to institute what we’ve characterized as a SME excellence initiative, or a subject matter expert excellence initiative, which is around providing good tips, good guidelines, maybe some brief training around what some of those best practices are in instructional design, what some of the core concepts are in adult learning to try to get them to put them to work in the presentations that they’re creating. And we’ve seen some organizations embrace that, some that we’ve worked with, some that we haven’t. And I think kind of mixed results on how that actually turns out, and we’ll talk about that a little bit, that it’s one thing to suggest to subject matter experts that this is valuable. Getting them to really embrace it and doing it can require a little bit more.

Celisa Steele (14:49):

But, if you think about how essential it is for a learning business to know that its learning products are effective—because its reputation is really staked almost entirely on the effectiveness of those learning products—if you take that into account, then it really makes perfect sense to invest in support and/or education for subject matter experts. Because if you’re going to use those folks in developing and delivering your products and services, you want to make sure that what they’re putting out there is backed by the science of adult learning.

Jeff Cobb (15:27):

It's a good point, Celisa. Depending on the situation, support may work as well or even better than education or training. If you're developing a self-paced e-learning course, for example, then pairing an instructional designer with a subject matter expert can work perfectly well. That might be the right thing to do there, but if you need the subject matter expert to be solo or center stage during the design and/or delivery of the learning experience—for example, in the case of the typical conference session or Webinar—then you're really going to need to teach them to fish, to teach them effective, science-backed approaches to apply—and, along with that, point out some of the debunked approaches to avoid but that unfortunately get used all too often.

Celisa Steele (16:17):

Yeah. I think we still hear far too much about learning styles, this idea that there are visual or auditory or kinesthetic learners. But really what the science shows is that people might have preferences, but there aren't strict styles. So it's not like you have to present content this way for "visual learners" and another way for "kinesthetic learners." People might have preferences, but we've actually discovered that really most people benefit from experiencing kind of content or skills or knowledge along multiple domains—

Celisa Steele (16:50):

both seeing something as a visual and then reading about it or hearing it talked about. Another place where I think we may need to do some debunking is some of the strategies for how we tell learners to learn. Strategies like rereading or highlighting are not nearly as effective as encouraging students to do things like active recall, having them quiz themselves, or asking them to elaborate, maybe have them write a little bit about a topic and how it applies to their work or their life.

Jeff Cobb (17:29):

Yeah, and subject matter experts are often unconsciously reinforcing some of those as things, like rereading things and highlighting things, and not thinking enough about the role they can play in providing practice opportunities, in structuring learning so it's spaced out over time, which we know is just so incredibly important, and really putting the effort, as they create their presentations, into how are they going to effectively gain and sustain the learner's attention? How are they going to maintain relevance? How are they going to promote that participation that is so important to the learning ultimately being effective?

Celisa Steele (18:09):

And so we've been talking about there's this problem of subject matter experts as ineffective educators, or at least ignorant educators—they don't really know how to do it. And then there's this opportunity to help subject matter experts be better educators. And so I think the question—and Jeff, you began to get into it a little bit a minute ago—but the question then is why aren't more learning businesses getting in on this opportunity to help their subject matter experts be better educators?

Jeff Cobb (18:36):

I think there are two issues. One—as you noted, I did start alluding to a little bit ago—is that many learning businesses feel that they *are* addressing this issue because they're telling their presenters that they need to include interactivity and engagement opportunities in their presentations. I myself have filled out applications to speak at a conference where they're telling

me very clearly this needs to be engaging. This needs to be interactive. And, honestly, it's not all that helpful, and it can feel a little condescending. So I'm not sure how our subject matter are feeling about that. And it's not surprising that we're hearing from many organizations that their presenters, as they put it, just aren't listening to this, they just aren't taking this advice that they're being given. But, of course, we know that's going to be true—if we borrow the words of Harold Stolovitch and Erica Keeps, as they put it “telling ain't training.” There's just too much telling going on.

Jeff Cobb (19:33):

So how are we going to model, how are we going to show people how to do this effectively? That's one issue—we're telling experts this needs to happen, but the experts are just saying, “Yeah, yeah, yeah.” And they're going on with what they're doing now. Now, the other issue I think, is that there are multiple actual or perceived barriers to doing anything more than telling. Telling you at least can check the box and say, “Yeah, we told them that it needs to be interactive. It needs to be engaging.” But going beyond that, learning businesses aren't necessarily sure how to help their subject matter experts at a deeper level. When you dig into it, andragogy and learning science, those are big broad fields, the kind of things you can study for years and get a PhD in. People go out and do that.

Jeff Cobb (20:20):

So there's a question of how much learning science is enough to make a difference. And which principles and guidelines do you focus in on because you can't expect a subject matter expert to devote years to studying learning science. And, in general, we complicate the issue a lot too, and go beyond that, and I often hear from organizations, “Well, we're special. We've got highly technical training.” Or there's some other aspect of what they're doing, and it just won't work for us to do this. Telling doesn't work, but we also really can't invest in doing something that's going to be specialized enough to really get the impact we need from our folks.

Celisa Steele (21:02):

I'll add another nuance to what you're talking about. And that's that learning science is evolving. Just think about neuroscience, which is relatively new. Now we have brain scans and other similar tools that are giving us more and richer and faster information about what's happening physically and mentally and emotionally when we learn. And then there's the evolving role of technology in the brain and therefore in learning too. I know in 2021 a computer connected to a brain-implant system, discerned brain signals for handwriting in a paralyzed man, and that allowed him to type up to 90 characters per minute, with an accuracy above 90 percent.

Celisa Steele (21:45):

If you just think about that whole brain-computer interface and even what's happening there, all of that is giving us more and more information about how people learn, what might be possible as we rely more and more on technology. I bring that up because even if a learning business does boil it down to the essential for subject matter experts, whatever's essential and true, that's going to be based on current knowledge and current findings and current technology. So someone needs to be keeping up with those new findings and the new theories and the implications for how subject matter experts do their jobs for that learning business.

Jeff Cobb (22:27):

The complexity and ever-evolving nature of learning science has given rise to a cadre of translators, folks who make it part of their life's work to look at the new studies and findings—coming out of usually academia—and translate that into practical how-tos for subject matter experts. I'm thinking of folks like Ruth Colvin-Clark, Julie Dirksen, Will Thalheimer, Connie Malamed, and many others, many of whom have been on the podcast. And serving that translator or bridge mode is also something that we do at Leading Learning through this podcast and other resources.

Celisa Steele (23:06):

That's true. We have "An Essential Guide to Andragogy for Learning Businesses." We have another guide called "On Learning Well: A Practical Look at Metalearning for Learning Businesses," and we've published those on the Leading Learning site. And we'll make sure to include links to those free resources in the show notes for this episode, which you can find at leadinglearning.com/episode291.

Jeff Cobb (23:29):

More recently we've added a video-based online course to our offerings called "Presenting for Impact," and that one's not free, but it's very affordable, especially compared to trying to develop something from scratch. It addresses some of the barriers we've been talking about by homing in on the most essential principles of adult learning and how they play out in a presentation that a subject matter expert might develop. And we've tried to make it light on theory. There's a lot of theory underlying it, but we don't make that explicit in the actual course. Rather, we focus on showing rather than telling, on trying to model those best practices throughout the content of the course, and also providing plenty of opportunities for the learner to take ownership and to apply the ideas that are presented. If you'd like to find out more about that offering, which again is called "Presenting for Impact," we will, of course, link to it in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode291, but you can also go to it directly at leadinglearning.com/presenting-for-impact.

Celisa Steele (24:48):

Another barrier—and I think this applies if you're going to make use of something like the "Presenting for Impact" course or any of these other resources—another barrier is that you have to convince subject matter experts to carve out the time to learn more, to learn about andragogy. We're all busy—or almost all busy—and I think that's a valid point.

Jeff Cobb (25:10):

Yeah, and I believe that most subject matter experts want to do their part well. They're not volunteering, in the case of they're volunteering, or even if they're getting paid, to do the job poorly. I believe they'd rather develop and deliver something that will have an impact and make a difference rather than just phoning it in. If you can tell them the story of how whatever training or support you're offering them will improve what they produce and thereby the learning outcomes, most subject matter experts are going to jump at that. They're going to want to do it. It's about helping them understand what's at stake so they engage. And then making sure that what you provide them is truly practical and helpful and hopefully compelling.

Celisa Steele (25:55):

This gets to the idea of walking the walk and not just talking the talk. Don't just say, "You should be engaging, you should be participatory."

Jeff Cobb (26:04):

“Thou shalt be engaging.”

Celisa Steele (26:07):

Right. This idea is let me show you how, some ways that you can be more engaging. And so, for a learning business, sound, science-backed approaches to learning really are essential. And a subject matter expert needs to see and hear from the learning business that it takes andragogy and that it takes proven methods and proven approaches seriously.

Jeff Cobb (26:30):

A less appreciated side of all of this is that providing those sorts of subject matter expert enrichment opportunities, opportunities for them to learn can also help attract and retain subject matter expert talent in what's often an increasingly competitive landscape. Like you said, people are busy. The people who are going to be the best presenters often have many other obligations, not necessarily just presenting in other places, but just doing their jobs, living their lives, doing whatever their professional practice requires. So convincing them to work with you if you're going to really support them well in doing that, if you're going to invest in them and help them improve, that's attractive. That can help make them loyal to your learning business. It's something you can even use as a thank-you to show that you really appreciate these people who are taking the time to create learning experiences for your learners.

Celisa Steele (27:33):

You mentioned competition there, Jeff, and that takes us back to some of what we were saying at the outset. Learning businesses usually face competition. Investing in subject matter excellence or enrichment, that helps to combat competition in two ways. One, it makes the learning products you offer better. And, two, it keeps subject matter experts loyal to and connected to your learning business, and the people on your team, the people in your network, those are almost always a differentiator and an asset in a competitive environment.

Jeff Cobb (28:16):

That's a look at the essential role subject matter experts play in most learning businesses and some thoughts on what you can do to best support subject matter experts. For full show notes and other resources to help you up your learning business's game by investing in your subject matter experts, please visit leadinglearning.com/episode291.

Celisa Steele (28:38):

At leadinglearning.com/episode291, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast. We hope you will subscribe if you haven't yet. Subscription numbers give us some visibility into the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb (28:52):

We'd also be grateful if you take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcast. Celisa 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.

Celisa Steele (29:08):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode291, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (29:19):

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

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