



Focus and Value-Building with Amber Winter

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 292

Amber Winter (00:00):

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Jeff Cobb (00:29):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:31):

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

Celisa Steele (00:39):

Welcome to episode 292 of the Leading Learning Podcast, which features a conversation with Amber Winter. Amber is CEO of Web Courseworks, a learning technologies company providing a specialized learning management system for associations and other types of learning businesses. As CEO, Amber is focused on helping customers deliver high-quality, impactful professional development to their learners, and she's focused on the learning culture within Web Courseworks. Jeff and Amber talk about Amber's transition to the CEO role, the state of the learn tech industry, and which trends are having an impact on learning businesses and learn tech. Spoiler alert: Artificial intelligence comes up. They also talk about competition and what learning businesses can do to stand out. Jeff spoke with Amber in February 2022.

Jeff Cobb (01:38):

I know you've been at Web Courseworks for a pretty good while now, but you're pretty new to this CEO role. So what's that been like, to shift from what you were doing before into, I guess, being the person in charge of everything?

Amber Winter (01:52):

Yes. So very new. I think I'm, today, a month into the role. It's really a challenge for me personally because I love sales and our market and working with our customers. And so that's going to be a transition for me, to kind of step away from that and focus on the business and the culture of the company. But it's fun, it's an exciting challenge, and it's professional development for me but also for our company to be at the place it's at right now and where we want to go and how we can help our customers get there. I'm excited about the opportunity and to be in

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available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode292.*

this role, but, with anything, it's going to be a transition for both myself and for Jon, our founder of the company.

Jeff Cobb (02:35):

Well, because this is a podcast that's so much about learning, I'm interested to know, are there specific things you're doing to get up to speed for the role, things you're reading, or mentors you're looking to?

Amber Winter (02:49):

Yeah, great question. I've actually been in a professional development group called Vistage. It's a peer group for CEOs. I've been in that for now a year. I also went through a Harvard Business School online program that addressed my weakness in finance a couple years ago. I've really been focused on my professional development to tackle this role and be in it and know that I've got to continue to surround myself with advisors and mentors so that I can live up to the position that I'm in.

Jeff Cobb (03:25):

I don't know, and I'm not going to, ask your age, but I know you're relatively young. You're certainly younger than I am. You're also female. And it seems like—in fact, it's been written about quite a bit—that we don't see a lot of representation of either younger generations or women in leadership roles at tech companies and, in this case, particularly, learn tech companies. I'm wondering, is that your experience? And, to the extent that it is, do you see that changing? Obviously, you're changing it some, but do you see it changing in general?

Amber Winter (04:01):

Yeah. I'm personally very fortunate to have worked at a company that I've not been discriminated against. But you're right. It's an obvious problem in the software industry. I will say that the organizations we work with, associations, it's not a problem. It's really a software industry problem. And I do see it changing. I see it improving. I see software companies being the place to be for flexible, remote work environments. And what better for millennials, for females to really enter in and have flexibility in their careers. So I think we're primed in the software industry to have an open door. The barriers that I see are current executive teams at software companies have to be open to coaching and mentoring. Again, back to the professional development, I wouldn't be here if Jon Aleckson didn't invest in my professional development when I told him this is what I wanted to do. I think we have to have an open mind and really focus on coaching and mentoring, regardless of sex or age. And making sure that we're providing opportunities for people that are ready to excel.

Jeff Cobb (05:20):

I really love hearing what you're an example of because it sounds like Web Courseworks and Jon did see the potential in you and invested in that, and there was that professional development in helping you to come along in your career. Which, I mean, it's what you hope is going to happen with every person in every role at every company or organization. But we know it doesn't. So it's good to have you as a shining example of that being a successful thing for an organization to do.

Celisa Steele (05:49):

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Amber is the new CEO of Web Courseworks, and here's more about the company. Web Courseworks is a learning technologies company with an ever-evolving learning management system, Course Stage. Course Stage 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. We encourage you to check out Web Courseworks, and you can find the 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/episode292. Now, back to Jeff and Amber's conversation.

Jeff Cobb (06:52):

There's just so many questions we might explore here, but I thought we'd start at a higher level around just learntech in general, the state of learntech out there, since you're in the thick of it basically. One thing that's become clear to me over the past few years is we've got a level of buzz that reminds me of the early days back when I got involved with learntech, the go-go dot-com days, where everybody was investing in tech companies, everybody was investing in learntech companies. And we've certainly got, I think, a lot more buzz around learntech right now. We do have investor money flowing in. We're seeing acquisitions. We're seeing mergers. And, of course, like I said, there've been these kinds of surges and ultimately bubbles before. But this time I'm wondering if it's a little different. Do you see anything special about the opportunity that learntech represents right now? And maybe especially with an eye towards that adult lifelong learning, continuing education market, which I think has probably been underserved before.

Amber Winter (07:58):

I think that the investment, the hope of the investment is to really improve the technology. And it's super exciting to be in our position as a learntech company in this surge. Now, with that excitement and that hope, again, we need to see it, in reality, improving our products and the technology that's used to drive these learning businesses. Have we've seen that happen yet? I'm not sure. But I get really excited about the strategic investments that are happening between like-minded organizations, combining and working together to improve their product. I think that's very promising. I don't know where that's going to go or how we use that or capitalize on it. But it's always a good thing when there's more investment in the space and the promise of really improving the technology that comes out of it.

Jeff Cobb (08:49):

And when you look at where things are headed, we've got trends out there like virtual reality, augmented reality, artificial intelligence. We've seen a huge movement of events online—so online conferences now. When you think about the trends that are out there, what do you see as the areas for the most significant positive impact in the near future, let's say, one to three years out?

Amber Winter (09:20):

I see artificial intelligence, personalized learning being the thing that we're closest to that will really make a big impact on what the technology is doing for the industry. There's always trends in and things that are going to come up, like LXP or virtual reality. But it also is, what is the customer ready for? The technology can only really implement and change as fast as what

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the market is ready to support. At Web Courseworks, we're consistently talking to our customers and trying to be agile with what do they want to do with the platform. How do we improve it in ways that they will actually use it, rather than following the buzzwords? And I think that's what we need to focus on, in the short term, is we are seeing real-life applications of personalized learning and how that can help the learning outcomes, engagement, adding value for learning businesses to say, "You should be here. This is better than Coursera. Because it's really personal to you and what you're doing in your career." That's probably the biggest area of opportunity in the next three years.

Jeff Cobb (10:31):

In terms of, you mentioned, that "What are customers ready for right now?," how have you seen that evolve in recent years? You said there are some instances where personalization can come into play, and there seems to be some readiness for that. What are customers prepared to do now that maybe they weren't three or four years ago? What are they clamoring for that maybe they weren't three or four years ago?

Amber Winter (10:57):

They're a lot smarter. The pandemic forced us all to learn online learning. And that's amazing for us learn tech providers because we have people comfortable in front of a camera. We have people comfortable with social learning. So I think they're ready for more engagement. They're ready to invest in higher-quality education, not just quantity, but quality courses and certification programs. I think one of the challenges with our customers is accreditation rules and just working around some of the formalities that they have to. But we can be innovative and think of different ways to accomplish those goals and add value to the learning experience.

Jeff Cobb (11:44):

Well, you just used the term *learning experience*, and you threw out the acronym *LXP* not too long ago in the conversation. There has been the growth of the learning experience platform, the LXP. There are other platforms out there that have been there for a while, like learning content management systems. You've got learning record stores handling data. There's a lot that's emerging and evolving in the platform world. And then, of course, we've already mentioned, you've got virtual events, virtual conferences going on. Those are another type of platform that are evolving.

Jeff Cobb (12:16):

You're a learning management system company. I know you provide services around that, but your core software, your core learn tech, is a learning management system. Where does an LMS fit in now, in that landscape of the technologies that are out there? Five years from now, will we still be talking about an LMS? Or are we going to be talking about just a general learning platform, a learning and events platform? Get your crystal ball out. Where are we going?

Amber Winter (12:46):

Oh, there's a lot of questions in there that you just asked me. But I think the difference...what I've seen with an LXP and when people say they're looking for an LXP or when I look at just the Web sites of LXPs, it's all about enticing the learner and focusing on some of those more, I would say, corporate use cases of boring compliance training that we need to get somebody to take. Whereas, in our world, we're creating learning businesses, and it's more about the marketing, the personalization. Those are also "features" of an LXP, but LMSes have to do that,

and they have to do it right now. That's not a future state. It's happening right now. The learning management system has to do that.

Amber Winter (13:35):

Whether the market starts deciding to call all of these *learning platforms* and being more broader, I think that makes more sense than trying to differentiate between an LMS and an LXP. But I don't know where that's going to go. I just know that there's plenty of features that your learning management system should have that are meeting that "dream of LXP" as well because we're all data-driven. We have to use that information to recommend content and really focus on the learning experience.

Jeff Cobb (14:07):

And all of these platforms—learning management system, learning experience platform, the various events platforms—they're all trying to help the learners, the attendees solve problems, hopefully, progress in their careers, get the learning that they need. When you think more broadly about some of the things we're wrestling with as a society, as a culture, what are the real learning-related opportunities or problems that we need technology to address for us? How do you see the platform you offer and learning platforms in general helping us to address problems and maybe solve problems that we couldn't without them?

Amber Winter (14:52):

Yeah. The learning platform is really important to drive that experience for the learner with engagement opportunities and then really tracking the learning outcomes. I think we're in this universe of so much content that you could go anywhere to get any content. I think there was a statistic of YouTube—there's how many hours posted every single minute. So there's so much content out there.

Amber Winter (15:21):

The learning platform market and learning management systems and associations using those or learning businesses providing content, they have to use those platforms to engage learners, create communities around education, but then also assess those skills and the skill development. We've seen a lot in competency management and really measuring and tracking skills progression. And I think that's one of the things that we add value, is helping organizations track and manage actual skills and improvements, outcomes, data. How are we providing higher-quality education that's improving this individual and what they know now after they've gone through our courses?

Jeff Cobb (16:03):

And when you think specifically about the world of trade and professional associations, because I know that's where you do the vast majority of your work, and the kinds of problems they're helping their members solve, the opportunities they're helping them take advantage of—and you just enumerated some of them—but when you think about that wide range of organizations that serve adult lifelong learners—there are others, academic continuing education units, there are commercial training firms—what do you feel the particular opportunity, the special opportunity for associations is in this kind of learning landscape?

Amber Winter (16:42):

They're the experts, and they have so much expertise, subject matter experts that are in the field every single day that are members of their association, and capturing that value and that expertise as it shifts all the time. Being able to continue to update their content and courses and create this community of practice is really the vision of the association and the education that they're putting out there. So, I think they're maybe challenged by that but also in a great position compared to other types of organizations because they have that knowledge base that not a lot of people have access to. So it's really more about capturing that and learning how to repurpose and market it so that it creates high-quality education products for them to build a learning business from. That's the opportunity here in this space.

Jeff Cobb (17:49):

Do you have much of a sense that associations that you talk with and that maybe become your customers are feeling threatened by some of what's going on out there? I'm thinking that there are now large commercial training companies—like Udemy has a huge catalog of offerings. There are a lot more commercial organizations that have membership models, for example, and are often rolling in subscriptions to training and education as part of those membership models. What have you seen the association perspective and response on that to be?

Amber Winter (18:23):

I think they're always going to have competitors, and, yes, they are feeling that competitive environment. But they're in a position to provide more specialized education than, say, a university that's broader and serving a lot more markets. So the promise of the association is really focused on that specialization, the specific industry that they're serving. And they already have this member base that is their audience. But I have seen them expanding that. I've seen our customers focusing not only on their specific industry but like-minded organizations working and partnering with other associations to help each other and combine forces so that they do have more competitive advantages as well against the Udemys of the world.

Jeff Cobb (19:12):

Whether it's an association or any other type of learning business, a market-facing organization serving adult learners, what advice would you offer somebody right now? And maybe let's take that from two perspectives. Somebody who's just getting into it, really trying to launch into it, what do they need to keep in mind? But then maybe I know you're probably working with some more mature learning businesses, larger, that are trying to compete, trying to grow, trying to expand. What types of advice would you offer those different types of organizations?

Amber Winter (19:48):

Well, for the first set, organizations just getting it into it and starting out, content is king. Still is. Always will be. And you have to have quality content that is teaching them something, is teaching your user something, and know the value of that. We've had a lot of people come ask us for an LMS, and they're not ready for it. So you've really got to focus on your content plan first and then how are you going to address the market with that plan, with that awesome content that you've developed.

Amber Winter (20:19):

For more established learning businesses, we see a lot of success with products like self-assessment programs, test prep programs. So creating education content that is specific to certifications, continuing education that can be tracked and adds value to the professional for

their career. You're always just trying to match that product that you're offering to some kind of value proposition and making sure that what you are putting out there is valuable to the learner that you're targeting.

Amber Winter (20:55):

And what we've seen is actually a consolidation of content with our larger learning business customers that have, maybe they came to us with hundreds of products. I've seen more of a focus on, okay, well, these are our top 10. This is really our high-quality education products. How do we continue to improve those and focus here? Rather than trying to build out a vast library of things that will quickly get outdated. It's more about focus and value-building in those programs that you already have an audience that you've seen success with.

Jeff Cobb (21:31):

Are there examples you can offer of organizations that you think are doing that particularly well? It sounds like there's a certain amount of clarity in what you're going to deliver, providing learners with a clear path to accomplish the specific set of goals that your organization can really serve well for them. To the extent...you don't have to name names, if you can, that's great, but, even generically, to describe some of the organizations you know that are doing that.

Amber Winter (21:59):

Yeah. I think I can share a few because they're on our Web site anyways. One of our customers, the American Society of Hematology, they've been very focused about their education planning, and they came to us with a lot of different programs but then created this niche focus on ones that really added value. One of those for them is their self-assessment program, and they're running that and continuing to improve upon it and using an iterative process to continue to add value there.

Amber Winter (22:28):

Outside of the medical space, the Institute of Real Estate Management, they have created a certification program for property managers that relied a ton on in-person classroom, local-based courses, pre-pandemic. And now they're using our LMS to deliver the certification program, still instructor-led, but really rethought the model. And it's been wildly successful over the last two years. They've seen a huge growth. They can reach more property managers. But they still have that instructor component, so it's still very personal, and they're creating a community around it. But that certification program, it's more formal education than just attending a Webinar. There's a series of six classes they have to attend, discussion forums, etc. Creating that value package in a more formal environment has been pretty successful for our customers that have these products that are really successful.

Jeff Cobb (23:29):

And, to clarify, are these happening totally online? Is there any face-to-face element at this point in these programs?

Amber Winter (23:37):

There is. There are face-to-face components. Well, right now, no. Yeah, but I'm saying...I guess I say face-to-face. There are some virtual Zoom sessions happening in some of these programs to

increase the social engagement that happens, but I'm seeing that used more in the collaboration aspect of the course, rather than the formal learning of the course.

Jeff Cobb (24:00):

Right. And I need to be careful these days when I say "face to face" because I know we're technically to face to face right now because we're using video as we do this. So more in person. And part of the reason I was asking that is I'd love to have your perspective because I think everybody is sort of wondering about this, a lot of gnashing of teeth about what's going to happen with in-person over time. Are we eventually going to a place where in-person assumes the same role that it had before? Or have we really experienced a fundamental shift? You noted earlier that people have woken up to e-learning. They've got a lot more experience with it now. They're a lot more comfortable with it. Are we now at a point where maybe the balance is tipping to online, and face-to-face...I'll say in-person is going to be something more special going forward?

Amber Winter (24:53):

I mean, I hope so. I hope so because it increases the quality of both aspects. You've got your online education that enables you to broaden your reach. It enables education to happen without time limits and without restrictions, geographically. There's a lot of positives that come from that. But there is so much value in that in-person experience for specific reasons. Not necessarily to go to a conference hall where there's 600 sessions happening at different times, and you can't possibly be in six rooms at a time. That wasn't valuable to begin with.

Amber Winter (25:32):

So I hope that those in-person experiences become more purposeful and strategic, and they have so much value around the community-building and mentoring and learning from each other, more case studies, and some of the things that are just easier conversations to have when you're in a room with someone, compared to online. I think they both serve their own purposes, and I'm just hoping that this opens the door to higher-quality education on both sides.

Jeff Cobb (26:03):

This is a related question because I think traditionally what's been a problem for online learning is that people feel like online learning isn't as good. Online learning isn't as effective. You have to be in person if you really want to get the best experience. And we know that there's plenty of research to say, "No, that's not the case." But do you feel like people are more willing to accept the possibility that e-learning can be, often is just as good or better than in-person at this point? Is there more receptivity to that than there's been in the past?

Amber Winter (26:38):

I think there is. And this is where it goes to the quality because if you're just sharing Webinars and calling that online education, while it's an aspect, that's not the quality education like you're going to get at a conference because you're not being evaluated. There's no testing component. You're not being held accountable for what you're learning there. And I think the online education that adds value is a little bit more formal, maybe puts the learner on the spot with a timed question right after they watch the video. One, it depends as far as how the online education is delivered, and that's on us learntech vendors and the industry using our technology and putting online education out there—we're responsible for that quality that's happening online.

Jeff Cobb (27:28):

Well, maybe to wrap up our conversation, I'll circle back to close to where we were at the beginning. And, we noted, you're a new CEO at this learn-tech company. When you think about your goals for yourself, for the company, and really for the audience you're serving—I imagine that has to be top of mind for you right now, coming into this position—what are some of your goals going forward? What are you hoping will happen with you, with Web Courseworks, and with this whole adult learning sector that you're serving?

Amber Winter (28:02):

I hope to see not only Web Courseworks but all of us become even more agile, changing faster, improving our quality of education faster, finding ways to engage and collaborate online that's different than just a Zoom meeting. So how do we get over the Zoom fatigue? How do we move forward and really use what we've learned the past couple of years to enhance the quality of what we're doing and the work that we're doing at Web Courseworks? That's our mission right now, is how do we take this and the investment happening in this space, the comfort level happening with online learning, and use that energy to enhance what we're doing and improve as a company. And hopefully the industry will continue to improve as well.

Jeff Cobb (28:50):

I think that is a great perspective on it, that we do have so much momentum, so much new, positive energy that has flowed into this space over the past couple years for unfortunate reasons, and, I guess, because of COVID being a big driver of it, but, nonetheless, it's a time of opportunity. And I think that's a great perspective on it.

Celisa Steele (29:15):

Amber Winter is CEO at Web Courseworks. You can learn more about her work at webcourseworks.com, and you can connect with her on LinkedIn.

Jeff Cobb (29:27):

At leadinglearning.com/episode292, you'll find links to the Web Coursework site and Amber's profile on LinkedIn, as well as full show notes, a transcript, and other resources.

Celisa Steele (29:36):

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Jeff Cobb (29:49):

And we'd be grateful if you take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcast. Celisa and I personally appreciate knowing there are others on this leading and learning journey, and reviews and ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Just go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review and rating.

Celisa Steele (30:07):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. At leadinglearning.com/episode292, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

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Jeff Cobb (30:17):

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

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

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