



Intentionality in Learning with Courtney Vital

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 293

Courtney Vital (00:00):

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Jeff Cobb (00:27):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:28):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:36):

This is episode 293 of the Leading Learning Podcast, which features Courtney Vital, the vice president of learning at the Association for Talent Development. ATD is the largest association for professionals who develop others in the workplace, and its membership reflects individuals from all over the world, in all industries and sectors. ATD is focused on advancing talent development, convening a community of people who do talent development work, and supporting them with knowledge and resources. ATD offers research and content in many forms, including books, magazines, podcasts, courses, conferences, Webinars, and two certifications, the Associate Professional in Talent Development and the Certified Professional in Talent Development.

Jeff Cobb (01:22):

Courtney describes herself as a learning leader for learning leaders. She and Celisa talk about how the pandemic forced us to rethink in-person learning as the default; about the need for equitable experiences in hybrid learning; about competencies, capabilities, and a future focus for the learning profession; and about the skyrocketing importance of intentionality in learning design. Celisa spoke with Courtney in February 2022.

Celisa Steele (01:57):

I'd like to start with the pandemic, which is ongoing as you and I are talking. And I just want to ask, and I know it's a really big, broad question, but how has COVID impacted ATD's work and the work of those that you're serving?

Courtney Vital (02:12):

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode293.*

Yeah, it is a broad question, but it's also the most relevant question that we're all grappling with right now. I'll start with the profession itself. Obviously where the workplace is in a physical sense and the needs that the employees and organizations have has massively shifted. And then, of course, you factor in all of the societal impacts that have been driven by COVID, and it really has changed just about everything that learning and development professionals are having to respond to and the ways that they are ensuring that the employees and the workforces that they serve have the skills they need in order to not just maintain business continuity but also to really get ready for that kind of post-pandemic future that we all hope is near on the horizon, right?

Courtney Vital (03:04):

One of the things that we saw with COVID was the idea that training is something that is maybe an afterthought after a business initiative is launched, we really saw that dissipate in favor of really solidifying that learning is essential to the work that is happening inside of organizations. There are many pockets of that happening in the broader workplace environment, to be sure pre-COVID, but I think COVID was really beneficial in the way that it's solidified that learning and development was really at the forefront of ensuring a business continuity and maintaining the day-to-day operations as people maybe had to shift to a remote work environment.

Courtney Vital (03:51):

But also, as I said, really bringing the employees together to figure out how are we going to address the changes in the environment that, in some cases, are really challenging for many businesses. For ATD specifically, we also lost the ability to bring our learners together physically. But it also really sped up a lot of the work that we were already doing toward developing digital development solutions, which for us has been where we are getting a lot of our energy and excitement and really see that beneficial aspect of COVID. If you can say that there have been beneficial aspects.

Celisa Steele (04:32):

Well, we can certainly hope that something that's brought so much pain and suffering, hopefully also will bring some opportunities, which you're speaking to. Just the emphasis on learning has in many ways been a benefit that has come out of the past couple of years and the speeding up of the digital adoption and just the comfort level of so many people with technologies. I do see that as a positive, even though it does feel sometimes odd to say that.

Celisa Steele (05:03):

Now, related to COVID's impact and part of what you were talking there around losing some of the in-person and speeding up your digital development, what do you think is going to happen with hybrid and blended learning going forward? What role do you think in-person learning will have once it's safer to meet again together in person?

Courtney Vital (05:29):

You know, for better or worse, I think pre-COVID, in-person was really seen many times as the default or as the preferred option, where it were to be available. And I think what we're seeing now is a planned kind of intentionality around how format or modality can be used. And, within that, really identifying what are the benefits or the uniquenesses of each of those formats or environments. And oftentimes that leads to a blended learning experience because it's really

about what are the learning outcomes I'm trying to deliver for the participant, and then figuring out the most effective way to do that. And, if you're coming with that perspective, inevitably, you're going to be making recommendations or decisions around an integrated kind of solutions approach. One example of that is in an in-person environment. How can the learner interact with their device to engage with digital resources and content to really maximize the learning as it's happening and set them up for what we really are always striving to do, which is maximize learning transfer?

Courtney Vital (06:45):

I also think it's about intentionality in figuring out how to elevate the learning experience itself. One of the things I'm frequently saying is that, if we are going to get people out of their day-to-day, where there are unprecedented amounts of challenges and sometimes constraints, and if we're going to compel individuals who may be working at home to come back into the in-person classroom, I think we have to be, as learning organizations, thinking about new ways to offer the type of experience that people will be looking for when they're coming together. So whether that's optimizing opportunities for network or that human connection element or just really planning with intention for the time that you have together and what needs to be delivered there versus in your other digital opportunities. I think that's really, really critical. We've been talking for a long time about the flipped classroom, and really, at its core, that's about ensuring that when you are together as a community that what is happening there is the most appropriate discussions or experiences to drive toward that larger learning outcome.

Celisa Steele (08:09):

It sounds in what you've been talking about so far, that that's all part of what I would tend to describe as blended learning, right? It's how to take advantage of these multiple modalities—in-person, online—and what content or what activities do you do in each of those modes? What are your thoughts about hybrid? And, for me, hybrid is this idea of you have some people in-person, and you have some people participating virtually. Do you have thoughts on where we're headed with that?

Courtney Vital (08:43):

Yeah, it's a great question because I think it will become continually more relevant as we end up maybe in more situations where our workday is happening in a way where not everyone is there together physically, right? So what will cascade out of that is, "Well, how are we going to deliver learning hybrid fashion to people that are there physically and those that may not be?" So, yeah, we are asking a lot of those same questions, and I think, based on lessons learned, one of the biggest challenges is around really delivering an equitable experience and a consistent experience for both audiences. I talked a minute ago about the paradigm of in-person being seen as the preferred place where learning could happen, whether or not you agree with or disagree with that.

Courtney Vital (09:34):

And, of course, there are many nuances, as I just spoke to. I think that one risk of hybrid is you have the people who are there physically really driving that experience and the creation of a sense of disconnect with people who are not. I think that we've never had better technology to solve for that. And really it comes down to, where it may be necessary, it's about intentional, planned design and really making sure that we are considering those learning outcomes—how the application will be designed and executed upon? Assessment—how will that learner have an opportunity to demonstrate, receive feedback? All of those things that are really core to a

successful learning opportunity, it has to be planned equally for both audiences. And I would take the hard line of saying if that's not possible, then that may be where hybrid may not be the best option.

Celisa Steele (10:36):

Well, I appreciate that focus on intentionality. And then I like that added dimension of equity, of being equitable. And then perhaps that being a way that helps you make decisions. If you can't be equitable, then perhaps a hybrid solution doesn't fit in that context.

Jeff Cobb (10:55):

If you're looking for a learning technology partner who can help you with online, blended, and hybrid offerings, check out Web Courseworks. 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. You can find a link to the Web Courseworks guide in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode293. Now, back to Celisa's conversation with Courtney.

Celisa Steele (11:53):

I know that ATD offers certifications. You yourself are a CPTD, I believe—a Certified Professional in Talent Development.

Courtney Vital (12:03):

Yes.

Celisa Steele (12:04):

Great. I would hope that you would talk a little bit about the role that you see certifications and perhaps other kinds of credentials playing in learning and talent development. And, in particular, if there are any shifts or trends that you're seeing, I would love to hear about those.

Courtney Vital (12:22):

Yes, thank you, Celisa. I am a proud holder of the CPTD certification, and I think that speaks to the fact that I believe that credentials and certifications are really critical. I look at it from the perspective of today, more than ever, there are so many ways to acquire knowledge, get information, Google something that you're looking for in order to answer a question that you might have on the job, or get up to speed on something. So that's just available. I think where the value of certifications and credentials comes in is just really about establishing a standard and then giving people an opportunity to validate that they've worked toward and ultimately met that standard. And that isn't something that is or should be easy to do. And so I think it represents a different level of consideration that someone has taken.

Courtney Vital (13:25):

And so there's an aspirational element or a growth element to that and really setting that bar of where we want a particular industry to be. It's about professionalization or where an individual

wants to go, depending on their role or goal, and providing an opportunity for them to learn what they need to learn, oftentimes convene with a community of people, whether that's through a formal learning event or going through the certification process. Oftentimes we hear that that's one of the most valuable parts of getting a certification is building that community of people who are going through the same process. It has that element of really bringing up a professional or an entire industry.

Celisa Steele (14:12):

There may not be any that come to mind, but are there any recent shifts or trends in credentials or in certifications that you've taken note of or that you think listeners might want to take note of?

Courtney Vital (14:23):

I think what we're seeing is that with LinkedIn and other sources of kind of information about what skills or experiences an individual has, people are really wanting to not only learn what they need to learn and achieve their professional goals and build a development path to get there, but it's also really about that validation and that sharing. Certainly a lot of that is showing up in the shift towards digital badging.

Courtney Vital (14:54):

And a huge part of that is really about being able to reflect the work that you've done, the experiences that you have, but also the skills that you've acquired, which is only beneficial and empowering to the individual. In particular, as you consider the trends that we're starting to see where many people are reconsidering what they want out of their work, and that's led to what we're calling the Great Resignation. Part of that is really going to necessitate learning new skills and then having an opportunity to show and share those skills so that it is more widely known to prospective employers or other individuals who you might be looking to to help you achieve your professional goals.

Celisa Steele (15:42):

I'm just struck by in how many of your responses this aspect of social and community and interaction with others has come up, even in terms of what we value with in-person learning to some extent or what we might need to emphasize more as we're looking to add it back in, and even with the certifications and that idea of the sharing, which, of course, means you're sharing it with others. So there's that social dimension there.

Celisa Steele (16:16):

ATD has a Talent Development Capability Model that caught my eye because we have a Learning Business Maturity Model. Models tend to catch my attention. Would you talk a little bit about that model and maybe how it came about?

Courtney Vital (16:32):

Absolutely. I'm a big fan of models too, Celisa, so I can definitely appreciate what you're saying. And that's why, when I had an opportunity to support the development of our latest model, I jumped at the chance to do that. And it was a really rewarding process to go through. ATD, by the way, has been doing competency models of the talent development professional and the various iterations of the naming of our profession. At one point, it was called training, and we have evolved to expand the scope of our profession to encompass much more than

training. And our competency models over that forty-year period have definitely evolved as well, to encapsulate the expanded areas that professionals need to know about. Our competency model, or the Talent Development Capability Model as we call it, answers the question, "What do talent development professionals need to know and do in order to be successful?"

Courtney Vital (17:27):

We launched it in 2020, and it represents a major research effort where we go out and ask our profession, "What do you do? What skills do you need to do in order to be effective in your job? And how will that change or evolve in the coming years?"

Courtney Vital (17:48):

We had over 3,000 people participate in the capability study for our model and ultimately then worked through analyzing all of that information with a body of experts and volunteers and practitioners and people who helped us synthesize all of that information into what is a model or visual representation of the knowledge and skills that talent development professionals need, not only today because it is future-oriented. It really intentionally helps us look at where is the field going and how are competency requirements changing and evolving as the field and the broader world is changing.

Celisa Steele (18:34):

You mentioned that your organization's focus evolved over time. You mentioned the transformation from focus on training to talent. And then you've been mentioning competency models. And I think that an earlier iteration of this was actually called a competency model. Now it's a capability model. Would you just comment on that distinction?

Courtney Vital (18:55):

Absolutely. Thank you for that question because I know I've been using both terms. By definition, *competence* is really about having the knowledge and skills to perform a job, whereas, if you look definitionally at *capability*, it's more growth-oriented or aspirational in nature, and it's really about implying a desire to grow or achieve toward a new future state. And so, when we were going through the process of doing the research and building our latest model, we heard a lot of feedback from the network of experts that we were working with that *competence* had connotations that really sort of lended themselves for people to think about a minimum kind of requirement whereas the word *capability* felt in line with its definition, felt more in line with the nature of the model that I spoke too, which is that it's not just the skills you need today. It's really about the skills you need today in order to be successful in the future as well. And so capability model felt like a natural evolution in naming, and we've received excellent feedback from our members and our learners and people who are engaging with the model, so it does seem to be resonating.

Celisa Steele (20:15):

Well, I wanted to ask you next about competency models and competency-based learning. Maybe I should rephrase the question and ask about what's happening with capability models and capability-based learning, but, in general, I know that *competency-based learning*, that's a term that we tend to hear about. Are there any trends or things happening in that area that you would like to note or think our listeners might be interested in?

Courtney Vital (20:40):

I think, first and foremost, competency models are becoming more known about and widely understood, which I see as a real positive. As we just spoke about, frameworks or models are really beneficial in that they can help us take complex information and make it easier to understand. But sometimes that's not the case with competency models, right? Sometimes they have a lot of information and can be harder to digest in their complexity. So I think that one thing that I'm seeing is digital tools and technology are giving us an opportunity to not only create these models or frameworks but actually give people an opportunity to drill into them and use them. And, certainly, that's something that we've done with our Talent Development Capability Model. It isn't just a static resource. It does give you an opportunity to dive into particular areas and then actually go through and assess your current proficiency in each of the skill areas, which is a good example of the sort of increased focus on application.

Courtney Vital (21:52):

So competency models for many associations are frameworks for product development or standard setting, or we align certification programs to them. And none of that is changing. In fact, I only see that increasing. But, with greater understanding of what the value of these models can bring, I think you're seeing more intent toward making them very useful and really prioritizing the ability for somebody who's engaging with it to get maximum value. So it can be very empowering to that individual as opposed to having the institution or the association, as in our case, just putting it out there for consumption. But, in this way, with the technology, people are really able to figure out the best ways to personalize or make the model most relevant for them.

Celisa Steele (22:48):

If we pick a up and look even more broadly, beyond competency models and what's going on there, are there trends and developments in this space that you see as significant and worth attention? And I'm just thinking very broadly of trends or developments in learning science or learning products, learning technology, any of these related fields.

Courtney Vital (23:13):

I think we're always going to see that there's going to be a revolving set of emerging trends in learning. Learning technology has certainly been one that typically comes to mind. I'm loving the increased focus on understanding how the brain takes in information and then makes sense of it and performs those cognitive processes associated with learning. I think that is tremendously beneficial for anyone in a learning organization or a learning business to really have a basic understanding if they're going to be developing experiences where we're trying to transfer learning and ensure that somebody can do something differently as a result of that experience, right?

Courtney Vital (23:59):

So it's really core. Aside from those kind of things that we typically think of, those kinds of areas that we typically think of when we talk about emerging trends, one of the things that we're seeing that may not be as typically thought of is change management. As I mentioned previously, in our capability model, we have an opportunity for people to assess their proficiency in all of the areas of the model, and we consistently see that change management is an area of opportunity for talent development professionals.

Courtney Vital (24:35):

And so it is interesting if you consider that we have been in the VUCA world—volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous. We talk about that a lot in the management leadership landscape. I think what we're seeing with change management now is it's not just about thinking about and planning for these bigger changes in society or the workplace landscape. It's about how are we going to use our effective change management skills to keep the day-to-day moving while also ensuring that our organizations and our people continue to thrive. And that's a really challenging balance. And I think being able to plan for, facilitate, communicate, and navigate that change is just increasingly critical for talent development. So it is interesting when you pair that necessity with the fact that there are some areas or opportunities for development.

Celisa Steele (25:43):

Would you talk about what you see being the key components or factors that contribute to an effective learning ecosystem?

Courtney Vital (25:51):

There's so many things, but I think the one that comes to mind immediately, Celisa, is really about planning and thinking about how you can make your offering as diverse as possible. And what I mean by that is thinking about it's not a one-size-fits-all, and that's not what our members, our learners, are looking for anymore. We talk a lot about in the learning space about learning in the moment of need. And so how are we considering where an individual might need to access information or a resource that learning provides us in the moment, all the way through to the other end of the spectrum, which could be an opportunity where a group of individuals are coming together to construct the learning from the ground up without a formalized curriculum?

Courtney Vital (26:43):

There is a huge spectrum when we consider the types of learning opportunities or experiences that any one of our constituents could be looking for. And I think that a learning ecosystem in today's environment really needs to take that diversity into consideration in terms of what people will be looking for because I think, when we do that, it leads to expanded access. It's more flexible for people. It may enable them to engage where they might not otherwise be able to because they maybe have a time or a budget constraint. It also lends to personalization. How can I configure a learning or professional development plan that is going to meet my needs? And that could be I might want a short, bite-size nugget of information from the learning in one day on one topic, and I might want something that's much more in-depth or formal on another topic, depending on what I'm looking for from a skill or professional development perspective.

Celisa Steele (27:48):

We're focusing more on opportunities for collaboration and partnership—so you might have an association working with a university or a corporation to develop or deliver learning. Do you know of examples of good collaborations or partnerships, or do you have any comments about what might go into making effective partnerships or collaborations?

Courtney Vital (28:16):

Yeah, I think one thing that comes to mind on that is, with the increase and very beneficial emphasis on diversity, equity, inclusion, I think it becomes really essential for us to be thinking

about ways to reach out and get access to information, a community of people, content, insights, thought processes, that are outside of what is maybe typical. So I just think, broadly, that we haven't necessarily seen what is to come there, and I do think that that is what's on the horizon. ATD is doing some work on diversity, equity, and inclusion and really trying to help equip talent development professionals with what they need in that area. And I think partnerships offer so much untapped potential, whether that is getting access to individuals who might not necessarily have traditionally been involved with the association, for example, or just really considering how we can leverage partnerships to gain access to new insights, new content, new learning experiences that our audiences are looking for, and just really expanding, like I said, that typical point of view and really bringing in new insights that are necessary to offer a holistic view at whatever the topic is that an individual will be looking to develop in.

Courtney Vital (29:46):

The other thing too I'll say is that for ATD this often shows up in our global work. And I think what we're seeing is, certainly with the disruptions driven by the pandemic, I think we're seeing a lot of the barriers to entry have lowered. Certainly, the ability to stand up an opportunity for people to convene or come together to learn, for example, in a virtual environment, maybe has less barriers than in the physical sense. So that, I think, is a tremendous opportunity for us to reach more people than we have before.

Celisa Steele (30:23):

What advice do you have for organizations that are in this business of lifelong learning, continuing education, professional development? What can they be doing to help ensure that they're going to thrive in the future?

Courtney Vital (30:36):

What I will say is directly born out of pain points and experiences that we have directly been impacted or influenced by. Data and technology. What I mean by that is it's figuring out how to harness both of those things in a way that enables you to achieve your strategy. And I think that we give a lot of lip service to that. I think definitely with technology but increasingly with being able to harness data. But I just can't emphasize it enough because so much of where we often are is time- and resource-challenged. And it can be very difficult to plan our efforts around how do we ensure that we have the right customer insights or member insights or audience insights in order to not just plan for today but really make sure that we're thinking years into the future. It's challenging.

Courtney Vital (31:36):

It takes a lot of expertise and time and planning to make sure that we're getting access to that data in a way that is aligned to the realities of the workday. For example, when we're developing courses, there's so many data sources that we're looking at and sometimes competing information to make decisions. So using data to make decisions and then being able to continuously look at that data and build a model that's agile enough to respond to those shifts. I think we all saw that with the pandemic. So many of the things that maybe we held to be true in terms of learner preferences or things that our members and customers were looking for has just shifted overnight. And I think it has left us needing new ways to tap into the insights from the market.

Courtney Vital (32:31):

And then, certainly from a technology perspective, I would say many of the same things. But what I think we're seeing is the need for an increased acumen around all things technology with the people that are designing, developing, delivering, and managing our learning products and experiences. And, again, I think we talk about that a lot, so that's not necessarily new. But I think the most successful businesses in the future are really figuring out not only how to create that as a specialized skillset or go out and get the right vendors or systems that they need to build the right learning technology infrastructure, but it's also building that capability within the people themselves that are driving the strategy.

Jeff Cobb (33:25):

Courtney Vital is the vice president of learning at the Association for Talent Development. You can learn more about ATD at td.org, and you can connect with Courtney on LinkedIn.

Celisa Steele (33:37):

At leadinglearning.com/episode293, you'll find links to the ATD site and Courtney on LinkedIn, along with full show notes, a transcript, and more.

Jeff Cobb (33:47):

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Celisa Steele (33:59):

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Jeff Cobb (34:16):

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Celisa Steele (34:26):

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

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