



Leading Learning at 300

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 300

Celisa Steele (00:00):

Embrace your role as a provider of lifelong learning. When you see your learning business as part of the ecosystem serving lifelong learners, you are better positioned to serve those learners and better positioned to deliver on your goals of reach, revenue, and impact.

Jeff Cobb (00:18):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:24):

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

Celisa Steele (00:33):

Welcome to episode 300 of the Leading Learning Podcast. That's right—episode 300. I feel like we need some fanfare or applause or something here.

Celisa Steele (00:43):

Okay, that helps this feel like a special occasion.

Jeff Cobb (00:50):

300 episodes is a big milestone and worth a little celebration. When we sat down to record episode 1 back in 2015, Celisa, I don't think either of us knew what was coming, and now it feels like a minor miracle that we're still plugging away at this.

Celisa Steele (01:05):

I guess if nothing else, we're stubborn.

Jeff Cobb (01:07):

Maybe tenacious. That sounds a little better than stubborn.

Celisa Steele (01:10):

Okay, tenacious. On this special occasion, the occasion of our 300th episode, we want to take stock. Such milestones are natural times to pause and reflect, and, as part of my personal reflection, I went back and listened to our first episode.

Jeff Cobb (01:30):

How was that?

Celisa Steele (01:31):

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode300.*

Well, I think I will confine my comments here to just saying that what struck me is that much of what we talked about in episode 1, which was six and a half, seven years ago, it's still stuff that we're talking about: the importance of reach, revenue, and impact; the role of data in making informed decisions; the need to innovate and create blue oceans.

Jeff Cobb (01:54):

So we're not only tenacious, we're also repetitive.

Celisa Steele (01:57):

Well, maybe, but you and I know the value of repetition when it comes to learning.

Jeff Cobb (02:03):

That is true. We've always thought of the Leading Learning Podcast as a learning resource, informal learning of course, but we've always hoped to provide practical and actionable insights. Since we've been doing this for almost seven years, I guess we can also claim that we've done some spaced repetition as well.

Celisa Steele (02:22):

One of the other things that we talked about in that first episode was the growing importance and growing recognition of lifelong learning.

Jeff Cobb (02:32):

Lifelong learning, definitely still important and even still growing in importance. So many of the things driving its importance back in 2015—technology innovations, the changing nature of work—are still driving the importance of lifelong learning today, and, of course, the COVID pandemic accelerated the pace of those changes.

Celisa Steele (02:53):

Yes, and the term "lifelong learning" isn't without its issues. In some ways, lifelong learning is a controversial term.

Jeff Cobb (03:02):

Yeah, it's funny. We've observed that over the years. We work in what we characterize as continuing education and professional development, but we think of it as lifelong learning. We sort of assume that the learning businesses we work with, the learning business professionals we work with, think of it as lifelong learning as well. But we've noticed over time that's not always the case. In fact, a lot of learning businesses don't necessarily embrace that term, "lifelong learning."

Jeff Cobb (03:30):

If you go—and I did this—if you go and do an informal survey of Web sites, you'll see continuing education and professional development all the time. You rarely see the words "lifelong learning." In fact, it's interesting, we sometimes even encounter learning businesses, organizations that say we don't do lifelong learning. They obviously think of lifelong learning as something different from the continuing education and professional development, conferences, meetings, seminars world that we all live and work in.

Celisa Steele (04:06):

I think that the fact that organizations we work with and serve sometimes don't own the term "lifelong learning" probably explains why we've tended to pair it with "professional development" and "continuing education." So we'll talk about working with organizations that serve the global market for continuing education, professional development, and lifelong learning. But, really, that's technically duplicative. That is, we see lifelong learning as the umbrella term, and professional development and continuing education fall under that umbrella. PD and CE are two types of lifelong learning in our book.

Jeff Cobb (04:44):

Yeah, that's right. Even academic degrees and diplomas, those tend to get dismissed as lifelong learning. Of course, that's not where we focus, but I'd argue, if you're an adult and you've worked and made a living, then going back for a GED or a master's is part of lifelong learning. For us, lifelong learning is any learning done by adults.

Celisa Steele (05:07):

This isn't purely semantics or only theoretical. If organizations don't view what they're providing as lifelong learning, then they miss out on recognizing peer organizations and potential partners. They also miss out on recognizing potential competitors because they'll fail to see University of Whatever or Coursera or edX or LinkedIn Learning as a threat when, really, the adults they serve might see all of those as viable options.

Jeff Cobb (05:39):

Yeah, definitely. Those companies you mentioned, they certainly recognize this. They're embracing lifelong learning.

Jeff Cobb (05:45):

I'll mention as an aside I did a LinkedIn post on this recently, so we'll be sure to link to that. It'd be good to get folks' reactions there. Coursera, edX, LinkedIn, they all know that the reskilling, the upskilling imperative is out there. They classify that as lifelong learning. Coursera's now getting into degrees, of course, on top of certificate programs, so they're definitely seeing this as a rich area.

Jeff Cobb (06:10):

One of those things that we have seen grow over the past six, seven years we've been doing this—and it was already growing rapidly—is competition. If you're a traditional continuing education and professional development provider, you've seen new entrants in your market unless you've been asleep. You've seen them come in sometimes in the forms of those companies like Coursera and edX, often in the form of your own subject matter experts who now have a completely new opportunity with the growth of online course platforms and other technologies that are now very affordable and very easy to use. If you're an individual subject matter expert who wants to reach a global audience with what you know, you can do it now. You don't have to have a big budget to do that kind of thing like you did back in the old days.

Celisa Steele (06:57):

I'd also argue that splitting hairs—and by that I mean thinking that PD or CE isn't lifelong learning—also harms the learners because it keeps the lifelong learning market confusing and

fragmented, and it puts a great burden on the learners to figure out how to stitch options together. And that burden, that need to figure it out, that hurts those most at risk. It hurts diversity, equity, and inclusion, and it means we're not living up to learning being the potentially equalizing, democratic force that we tend to want to hold it up to be.

Jeff Cobb (07:34):

Yeah, I think that's so important because one of the biggest things that has changed in the past couple of decades but especially in the last five to ten years is simply the level of access to learning experiences. I just referenced what you can do if you're an expert who wants to teach, if you're an organization who wants to get out there, but, on the lifelong learner side, what you now have access to is absolutely incredible. And not just courses and classes and conferences but all of the informal stuff, all of the flow of information. But, of course, that can be overwhelming very, very easily.

Jeff Cobb (08:09):

I think it's extremely important for all of us in the learning business to realize that we're engaged in a common enterprise, that we do all need to be thinking about this as lifelong learning and thinking collectively—what we do in our own development of learning experiences but also how we partner with each other, how we identify, how we interact across this entire learning business landscape to help people make sense, to help those lifelong learners, whether they're doing it in their professional lives or in their personal lives or, in most cases, it's going to be a combination. How do we help them make sense? How do we help them navigate through all of this and really take advantage of the huge opportunity that's now available to people?

Celisa Steele (08:54):

I think by thinking of "lifelong learning" as that umbrella term, then we recognize that there are others with us underneath that umbrella. I think that gets at the community aspect that you were just speaking to, Jeff, and also that sense of identity, that shared identity, that we're all serving this lifelong learning market. I think, too, that we also have the option to take that umbrella metaphor even further. This idea of lifelong learning really is becoming an essential part of what we need in order to live and work. We can think of lifelong learning as being an umbrella, as providing protection, as providing shelter, and we really need to do as learning businesses all that we can do to make that lifelong learning opportunity as welcoming, as understandable as possible to everyone who needs it.

Jeff Cobb (09:51):

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Celisa Steele (09:55):

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Celisa Steele (10:21):

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Celisa Steele (10:48):

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Jeff Cobb (10:56):

Just as embracing the term “lifelong learning” creates some cohesion, connection, and community, so does the idea of learning businesses.

Celisa Steele (11:06):

Yes. “Learning business” is a term that we coined, and it's one that we use all the time, but it feels like it could be good to define it now.

Jeff Cobb (11:15):

Right. In our world, it does have a specific meaning. We are talking about organizations, or it can even be individuals, solopreneurs who are doing this, but these are learning providers who are market-facing. They're creating learning experiences. They are selling them to adult lifelong learners. They have to generate revenue. Most of them have to generate positive net revenue, profit in what they're doing. So they are businesses, and they are learning providers, and that the blend of those two things makes them learning businesses.

Celisa Steele (11:51):

Learning businesses include trade and professional associations, academic continuing education units, training firms, edupreneurs. All of these kinds of organizations and people can be engaged in a learning business. Jeff, you just talked through several characteristics. I just added a little bit there. The reason we coined the term “learning business” is because there wasn't a succinct term that encompassed all of these organizations, and yet we see a common thread running through all of them—market-facing, adult learners, the need to really emphasize all of that. That's why we wanted to have this term that then provides that sense of community and connection and where you see that similarity there.

Jeff Cobb (12:35):

We should add, too, that another reason for this is this is different from standard corporate learning and development. We're not talking about corporate L&D organizations. It's different from academic degree programs. We said earlier the degrees, obviously, can be a part of lifelong learning, but that's a very different world to be an academic degree provider, whereas if you're a continuing education division, boy, there's been a lot of innovation and growth in that sector of academia, and those in our minds really are those market-facing learning businesses serving those adult lifelong learners.

Celisa Steele (13:07):

What we see is that these learning businesses are really in an ecosystem that's made up of lifelong learners. That's this biggest pool. We have lifelong learners who are out there trying to

figure out what they need to know, how to keep their skills and knowledge up to date, looking at the various options and exploring those and trying to find ones that match what they need and want. Of course, you also have experts out there. And, Jeff, you've alluded to this already, the fact that single subject matter experts have more options than ever to go out on their own and be able to provide information, but sometimes they also work with learning businesses. We know that a lot of learning businesses rely on subject matter experts to deliver conference sessions, for example.

Jeff Cobb (13:54):

This is really the world that we operate in as Leading Learning, as Tagoras, the parent company for Leading Learning, where traditionally we've concentrated very much on those learning businesses. But, over time, as we've seen what's happening with experts and the opportunities available to them, we've expanded out to reach that group to both help them in working with learning businesses and help them in being learning businesses themselves and really to deliver ultimately the impact that we want to see delivered across this learning business landscape, which brings us to that outer circle, the lifelong learners. Of course, we're all in that circle. If you're working in a learning business, if you're an expert, you are a lifelong learner. That encompasses all of us.

Jeff Cobb (14:36):

We've finally made a visual of this—this is something that's probably long overdue for us—to explain to ourselves and explain to the world where we see ourselves operating and serving this world of lifelong learning. We encourage you to go to the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode300 to see our visual of the learning businesses going out into the experts going out into the lifelong learners, and, of course, lifelong learners really encompassing all of that. What we're all about here is elevating and amplifying lifelong learning across those areas that we've just talked about.

Celisa Steele (15:12):

I think part of elevating it is tied up with understanding the similarities that you have with other learning businesses because that offers the chance to partner. It also helps with strategy because it means you'll be better attuned to the options that are available to your learners. I think the only thing worse than competing in a bloody red ocean is competing in a red ocean without realizing it.

Jeff Cobb (15:37):

Yeah. Even with a simple drawing, a simple illustration we're talking about, you start to realize this is big. There's a lot going on out there, to go back to what we were talking about earlier. It's confusing. There are a lot of new entrants in here that learners are having to sort through in that whole edupreneur space. Seems like everybody and their mother has a course out there now. It's the new form of having a book or something like that. So it's very competitive. It's very confusing.

Jeff Cobb (16:09):

I think that's why over the years we have repeatedly come to something like blue ocean strategy. We've talked about strategy just in general a lot because it is becoming increasingly necessary to be strategic, both as a learning business and as a learner, to really figure out how you fit in this landscape and how you make your path across this landscape. If you are a

learning business, if you are a provider, and you can't articulate that in a clear and compelling way to your learners, you're going to have a really hard time, I think, surviving and thriving out there in this emerging learning business landscape.

Jeff Cobb (16:46):

We'll definitely make sure we link to some posts and some episodes on blue ocean strategy and just some of strategic areas we've covered in general in the show notes for this episode. Again, for that, just go to leadinglearning.com/episode300.

Celisa Steele (17:01):

We've been talking about a couple of terminology issues. We've been talking about lifelong learning. We've been talking about learning businesses. The reason we're talking about terminology isn't because we're language nerds—though I think we are that.

Jeff Cobb (17:15):

I think we do qualify as that, yes.

Celisa Steele (17:17):

But the real reason is because we see value and opportunity in embracing your role as a provider of lifelong learning and in embracing your role as a learning business.

Jeff Cobb (17:30):

It is a huge opportunity. It's an opportunity. It's a service to the people. Whether they're members, whether they're customers that you're providing learning education experiences for, it's a service to the organizations those people work for. It's a service to the communities that those organizations operate in. It is a service to society. This is a big role, I think, for the whole arena of education to be an impactful provider of lifelong learning and to help to really elevate and amplify lifelong learning.

Celisa Steele (18:14):

There are three goals at the heart of almost all learning businesses: reach, revenue, and impact.

Jeff Cobb (18:22):

Getting these areas to work together is key to delivering value and achieving success.

Celisa Steele (18:27):

To hark back to our origins, we even talked about reach, revenue, and impact in episode 1. Reach, revenue, impact is the tagline of Tagoras, the parent company of Leading Learning. We've always hoped that this podcast helps you with reach, revenue, and impact.

Jeff Cobb (18:43):

Definitely. It's kind of an informal learning experience really centered around improving your reach, revenue, and impact. Maybe let's talk about each of those quickly.

Jeff Cobb (18:53):

Reach is about connecting with as many of the right learners as you can. It's not just about quantity but also about quality. Of course, again, strategy is key to figuring out who those right learners are. You have to be clear about whom you serve if you're going to have the reach that you intend to have.

Celisa Steele (19:14):

A common mistake is to say the audience for your learning business is everyone in the field, profession, industry, or whatever market you're focused on. Membership organizations and nonprofits with a mission often make this mistake, but other learning businesses are susceptible too. But it's usually not specific enough to say that your audience is X profession or Y industry. Usually the field profession, industry, whatever incorporates a huge range of variety. It's very difficult to serve that variety and even harder to serve that variety well.

Jeff Cobb (19:54):

Definitely. It goes back to that competitive aspect that we were talking about earlier. If you want to compete well, you do have to identify who those right learners are for the specific learning experiences that you offer. That's the reach aspect.

Jeff Cobb (20:08):

And then, of course, there is revenue. Revenue is the fuel. It's the lifeblood that keeps a learning business running and growing. Even for organizations organized as a nonprofit or organizations that offer learning as a member benefit, positive net revenue is usually essential or at least very highly desirable. Even in cases where breakeven is all that's required, doing better than breakeven means more money and therefore more resources to put against delivering on mission. And then, if you're a for-profit learning business, revenue is often a front and center goal, and maximizing that revenue then becomes important both from an idealistic point of view—the commitment to mission—and from an operational and fiscal standpoint.

Celisa Steele (20:54):

Revenue is, of course, tied to reach. You need to reach the quality and quantity of learners that we've been talking about. And, to maximize revenue, you need to understand your audience. What do they need? What do they value? What will they pay for? You also need to understand pricing. Pricing is something that we have talked a lot about on the podcast over the years, so we'll make sure to include in the show notes some links to some resources around pricing. And so we won't spend a lot of time on that right now, but I will just make the perhaps obvious point—but it's often overlooked—that increasing prices, as long as you do that without increasing costs, is the easiest way to increase your learning business's revenue.

Jeff Cobb (21:44):

That's revenue, and we've covered reach. The third leg in our three-legged stool here is impact. Impact is what makes a learning business vital and sustainable over time. It's hopefully what we're all going for. We're not just putting more information, more experiences out there just for the sake of doing it. We really want to help people. We really want to create positive change. We want to be able to know that we've done that. Learning businesses that can create significant impact for the learners, the organizations, and the fields and industry they serve, they not only survive, but they thrive. And learning businesses that fail to deliver or show impact, ultimately are going to have trouble surviving because of that competition for learners' time and attention and money that we've talked about. It's really fierce out there right now.

Again, learners are overwhelmed with choices and feeling increasingly time-poor, so they need to know that the learning they're investing in will really help them.

Jeff Cobb (22:44):

It's not just the learners who need to know that but also the employers and other stakeholders who have a hand in paying directly for the individual's education. They want to know that it means something. And, beyond the individual learners, there's also that mission perspective too. Many learning businesses—perhaps especially those that are nonprofits or within associations—have a higher mission that's focused beyond learners and is about raising the bar in the field or industry or profession they serve. I think even many for-profit learning businesses have that sense of mission. There's just something about being in education, being in learning that makes that kind of inherent to the business.

Jeff Cobb (23:29):

The fact is, it's easier than ever before to measure impact with some of the new and improved tools and technologies that we have. So it's becoming common for learners and other stakeholders to expect to get data about the effectiveness and impact of particular educational products or experiences. Of course, the learning businesses should want that data. They should want to know that they are having a measurable impact out in the fields, the professions, the industries that they are serving.

Celisa Steele (24:00):

Jeff, you already mentioned these are three legs of a stool. You used that analogy there. Reach, revenue, and impact need to be in balance. If reach and revenue are given too much emphasis and impact is neglected, then value problems are going to arise. Learners don't see the kind of results that will make them tell others and want to come back themselves. If reach and impact are stressed without sufficient emphasis on revenue, then the business is going to ultimately grind to a halt, whether that's quickly or over time, but that's because then it's going to lack the funding, the fuel to continue. And then, if reach is ignored while the organization aspires to revenue and impact, then you might have potentially valuable offerings that are best-kept secrets that no one really knows about.

Jeff Cobb (24:50):

So keep your goals for reach, revenue, and impact balanced, and keep those three goals balanced with an acknowledgement that you're serving lifelong learners.

Celisa Steele (25:01):

Embrace your role as a provider of lifelong learning. When you see your learning business as part of the ecosystem serving lifelong learners, you are better positioned to serve those learners and better positioned to deliver on your goals of reach, revenue, and impact.

Celisa Steele (25:24):

For full show notes and other resources to help you think about your learning business's role in lifelong learning, please visit leadinglearning.com/episode300.

Jeff Cobb (25:34):

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Celisa Steele (25:53):

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Jeff Cobb (26:03):

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

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