



Learning (or Not) at Conferences

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 306

Jeff Cobb (00:00):

I think it's also important, as you're looking at the conference itself and at that experience there, that you do everything you can to foster that, to help remind people that they are part of this shared identity, that, really, they're all in this together. And a conference is a great place for people to support each other in all sorts of ways. Of course, one of those ways is helping each other to learn and develop and grow.

Celisa Steele (00:26):

I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb (00:32):

I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele (00:36):

Welcome to episode 306 of the Leading Learning Podcast. After not attending in-person conferences for a couple of years because of COVID, Jeff and I have been back out, and so we want to focus this episode on learning—or not—at conferences.

Jeff Cobb (00:59):

I've recently attended three conferences in person. Celisa, you attended two of those as well. After a time away from in-person conferences, this return to them, and attending three in such short order, that really got us thinking about learning at conferences.

Celisa Steele (01:15):

Admittedly, this is a very unscientific sample, but the observations that we're going to share are based on two careers' worth of prior experience with conferences, so it's more than just these three, though these three are top of mind. One thing that I think of is that artists tend to get the question, "How long did it take you to paint that or write that or sculpt that?" I know that many artists will say something like, "Two weeks and a lifetime." That's where we're coming from with this episode. Our views of learning at conferences are based on attending these three recent conferences but also on our careers before that, where we spent a lot of time at conferences.

Jeff Cobb (01:59):

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode306.*

I'm betting that's true of so many of our listeners. Maybe all of our listeners. Conferences are just such a part of professional life. They're typically something that people are, in some cases, expected or are required to attend, but a lot of us want to attend them because they are how we keep on top of what's going on in our particular industry or profession, find out things, have conversations that we would not normally have, and, of course, participate in some workshops and some breakouts, some formal learning. Boy, we've done a ton of this.

Jeff Cobb (02:33):

Even before Tagoras and Leading Learning, we were doing conferences at former companies, both those we created and those we worked for. We were attendees. We've been exhibitors. I can't remember if we've been sponsors or not. I think we probably have sponsored at least one or two along the way. We've spoken at conferences. Both of us have spoken at many different conferences in many different roles. I should mention we've hosted our own conferences. We've done face-to-face conferences ourselves, and we have delivered online virtual conferences. Conferences are just a deeply, deeply rooted part of our lives. Like I said, I think that's probably true for so many of our listeners as well.

Celisa Steele (03:14):

In what you were just saying there, Jeff, we can hear that there are multiple perspectives on conferences. It can be instructive to keep those multiple perspectives in mind. There's the view of exhibitors. There's the view of sponsors, that of speakers and session leaders, that of attendees, and that of organizers. They're all probably going to have slightly different takes on what it would mean for a conference to be successful or for it to have return on investment. But, for today, where we're going to focus is really on the attendee perspective but with an eye toward what that attendee perspective might tell organizers about how to better design and implement conferences.

Jeff Cobb (04:00):

Our focus in this conversation is really on conferences that seek to focus, at least in part, on learning. Of course, learning is not the main aim of all conferences. You can think of big expos or trade shows or governing meetings, but many, maybe most, conferences do have at least some learning component to them.

Celisa Steele (04:22):

So to borrow a term from Nancy Bacon, we're talking about "learningful" conferences. Nancy and Mark Nilles collaborated on an e-book called "Conferences That Make a Difference." We will be sure to link to that as well as a past podcast episode where I got to talk to Nancy and Mark about making conferences more learningful. Check out the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode306. Their e-book is designed to be very practical in helping you make decisions about your conference, really plan it out in advance, so I do recommend that you check that out.

Celisa Steele (05:00):

A nuance that I'll add to our focus on learning is that many, many conferences have mixed goals. A conference has education sessions and a big expo hall. Or the conference serves as an annual meeting of some group, and there are certain governing business items that have to be done while that meeting is happening, and there are education sessions. They're serving multiple ends with one conference.

Jeff Cobb (05:31):

A lot of that's driven by people being there in person. If you're going to gather and have people travel, you want them to get the biggest return possible on that investment of time and money. It does take some time and money to do this. It can be really quite expensive to go to a conference. I think most, these days, are hundreds of dollars if not north of \$1,000 to register for. Then you've got the travel. You've got the food. You've got the time away from the office. So it makes sense that you'd be trying to potentially achieve a lot at a conference and having those multiple goals.

Jeff Cobb (06:12):

But more organizations, I think, would do better to be clearer about the priority of those goals for the organization itself, for the individuals who are going. And then, of course, the individuals—you, as a person, going to a conference want to be clear about your goals and what you want to get out of it.

Celisa Steele (06:30):

I think about that note about investment of time and money because there's what you think you're going to put in in terms of time and money. Then we were both delayed on at least one leg of our travels related to conferences. You have those added inconveniences, or it takes even more time than you thought you were going to have to spend on that. Then, too, while you're trying to focus on the conference, of course, home life and work life don't totally stop.

Jeff Cobb (06:55):

There are so many intangible costs, or what the economists like to call opportunity costs, related to attending a conference. So you have to keep that stuff in mind and really think about it when you're thinking about whether you're getting that return out of the experience.

Celisa Steele (07:10):

Now, virtual conferences aren't under the same pressure to put everything under one roof because it's cheaper to have multiple roofs if those roofs are virtual rather than physical. So virtual conferences offer the opportunity to disaggregate. I'll want to say thanks to Veronica Diaz of EDUCAUSE for that phrasing of it, "disaggregation." We interviewed her for the most recent *Virtual Conferences Report*. We encourage you to check that out if you haven't already. We'll include a link to *The Virtual Conferences Report* at leadinglearning.com/episode306. But, in short, the idea is that, if you are thinking about virtual conferences, you suddenly don't have to have the expo hall and the annual meeting where you vote on bylaw changes and educational sessions.

Celisa Steele (08:04):

Those don't all have to happen at the same time. If they aren't taking place under the same physical roof, you can break those apart, and you can even look at the educational sessions where, at a place-based conference, you usually have multiple tracks. People are choosing between "I'm going to go to the marketing track" or "I'm going to go to the operations track." You can even break those apart, and then have a separate virtual conference focused on marketing and a separate virtual conference focused on operations. Virtual does offer that ability to disaggregate.

Jeff Cobb (08:38):

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Virtual clearly has some benefits. That chance to disaggregate is a big one. Others, of course, include the much broader reach of virtual conferences. You're lessening the financial barriers, the geographic barriers, the time constraints. All of that means that you're going to be able to reach more people. That's huge. But, of course, there are things that virtually either doesn't do, or at least it's perceived as not doing, as well as in-person conferences. Networking, of course, is the really big one that we hear about all the time.

Jeff Cobb (09:12):

But things like trade shows, expos, the involvement of sponsors, that all gets cited as well. It's a different world. I mean, it reminds me Diane Elkins has made the point that you can have the exact same content at virtual, and you very often do, but it's not the same experience. It's a different thing to be in a virtual conference than it is to be at an in-person conference. That doesn't mean it's a lesser thing. It doesn't mean that you can't get a return on investment like you can at an in-person conference, but you need to be looking at that return on investment in a different way.

Celisa Steele (09:57):

We'd like to offer four recommendations to help you make sure that learning at your conferences is as effective as possible. These are the four recommendations. First, foster a sense of shared identity and belonging. Second, focus on the quality of your presenters. Third, limit the quantity of choices. And, fourth, think beyond the content.

Jeff Cobb (10:23):

Let's take a look at that first one, foster a sense of shared identity and belonging. In many ways, this is built into the conference world because, usually, you're offering a conference to serve people who are in the same profession, the same industry, or who have some common set of interests that you're bringing them together around. That's there, and it's there in the background, but I think it's also important, as you're looking at the conference itself and at that experience there, that you do everything you can to foster that, to really help remind people that they are part of this shared identity, that, really, they're all in this together.

Jeff Cobb (11:04):

A conference is a great place for people to support each other in all sorts of ways. Of course, one of those ways is helping each other to learn and develop and grow in the context of whatever that identity is.

Celisa Steele (11:20):

For me, with the two conferences I attended recently, it was a mixed bag. At one conference, I really felt that I was part of the community. I had that sense of shared identity. I felt like I belonged. That came across in the messaging from the organizers leading up to the event, at the opening and closing, just short comments on each day. I really felt like I belonged there. Even the after-session, hallway type-discussions, people were talking about things that I cared about, that I had some familiarity with. At another, I really felt left out, so it was that bad junior high experience. There was the "in" crowd.

Celisa Steele (12:05):

If you didn't know other people or weren't up to date on the latest trend or whatever it was, you ended up feeling excluded. That actually is important, not just because of the emotional

impact, but because that sense of belonging can lead to trust and a feeling of acceptance, which means that then you feel safe. We know that safety is one of the three conditions required for learner engagement. So any effort that a conference organizer puts into fostering a sense of identity and belonging, it isn't just rah-rah, feel-good stuff. It's actually helping to create a space where attendees can engage and learn.

Jeff Cobb (12:50):

Of course, they're engaging with each other. They're learning with and from each other. Cohort-based learning is really hot right now because it's so effective, and a conference provides a chance for cohort-based learning, for people to be able to be together in groups and engage in learning. You might imagine attendees, for example, being at the same keynotes, which was the case—well, that's the case at most conferences—and some conferences are even more driven by those general sessions. People are together at those, but then maybe also smaller cohorts, those being part of a track of sessions, which is something we experienced recently.

Jeff Cobb (13:32):

That is cohort-based learning. It's just on a relatively smaller scale and shorter timeline than might be possible in other ways of delivering learning experiences, but that's what's happening. That's, I think, a significant part of conferences historically and is becoming a more focused and structured approach to conference learning.

Celisa Steele (13:50):

You mentioned a conference providing the opportunity for cohort-based learning but on a shorter timeline than a multi-week-type experience. But I think one of the powerful things, if you can really foster that sense of shared identity and belonging, that's actually going to hopefully allow and empower attendees to stay in touch after the conference, and so you could take a cohort that's created at that conference, and then it can continue on.

Celisa Steele (14:21):

It can help make sure that the learning sticks. So you have attendees reaching out to each other, talking about how they're applying something, reaching out about questions, so you have that shared experience. You have those shared sessions, and those really become social learning objects.

Jeff Cobb (14:38):

I think that's really important and can drive so much, both formal but more typically just the informal learning that continues on after a conference experience. When people hear the same keynote, when they're seeing some of the same visuals, absorbing some of the same messages, those become points of reference for conversation, for discussion, for reflection going forward. They become the nexus around which people share and learn from each other. Conferences are just so great for providing, for creating those shared social learning objects.

Celisa Steele (15:16):

That's the first recommendation is to really foster the sense of shared identity and belonging. The second recommendation is focus on the quality of your presenters. Again, based on my recent experience, this was a real mixed bag. I think, in general, there tends to be this bifurcation. Presenters tend to be good at presenting, so the mechanics. I will just put in a little quick caveat that admittedly presenting is different than teaching. But, still, you have session

leaders who tend to be good at that mechanics of presenting, or you tend to get session leaders that really understand the audience, the attendees.

Celisa Steele (15:57):

That's often because they're coming from that community. I think depending on your field or industry or profession, it can be harder or easier to find session leaders who really excel at both. Just as an example, the National Speakers Association, their members know what it's like to have to hustle and do the business development as a speaker, and they're speakers, so they're going to bring both that presenting piece and the content piece. As a counter example—this is probably stereotyping a little bit—but if you come from a hyper-technical field, then the folks who really get the content and the context may not be natural presenters.

Jeff Cobb (16:43):

I don't know how many conference sessions I've been in over time where there was a crowd-pleaser in front of the room, and I walked out, and a day later, I couldn't tell you a thing that that person actually said, and on the flip side, somebody who clearly knows their stuff and is clearly offering high-quality content. But again, it can be a slog to sit there and try to absorb that. Some of that responsibility definitely is on the learner. Either way, you need to be able to engage with that content, take your notes, practice your good learning habits.

Jeff Cobb (17:17):

But, let's face it, how good the presenter is or isn't and how effective they can be in making it a learning experience does matter. It's one of the reasons that we developed "Presenting for Impact." We developed it because a conference organizer, somebody who is responsible for making sure that effective learning is delivered at conferences and then continuing education sessions, asked us to create it. So we created "Presenting for Impact" as a resource to help raise the quality of presenters to help bolster learning at conferences, both online and off, and then other types of virtual presentations.

Jeff Cobb (17:54):

We'll put a link to that in the show note. Anybody who's interested in "Presenting for Impact," it's free. If you want to be able to offer that as a resource out to your speakers or if you are a speaker and want to be able to access it, you'll be able to find a link to that in the show notes for this episode.

Celisa Steele (18:10):

I think economics come into play here, of course. Because of just the sheer cost, conference organizers might not go after all top folks. Instead, they tend to spend a pretty big chunk of the budget on a handful of presenters, typically, the keynoter. Then the concurrents tend to be that real mixed bag. On top of there being this mixed bag, as an attendee, I don't have a lot to go on usually to help me choose. I might have a title and a description, and those are often written months before the actual session is designed.

Celisa Steele (18:47):

I think we all know that an instructor can make or break a session. But if you haven't had the chance to get to know or see a presenter before, how do you know whether she's going to be really great or really terrible? The host organization, the organization putting on the conference, might have past ratings for a speaker, but I don't know of organizations making that

information available to attendees to potentially use in their decision-making. This would be a Yelp approach to sessions, where you see who has the five-star reviews.

Celisa Steele (19:20):

I'm not necessarily saying that they should, but keep in mind that your attendees have so little to go on often in terms of trying to choose the best choice for them out of whatever concurrent sessions are happening at any given moment.

Jeff Cobb (19:32):

It's a really interesting point. For political reasons or just general politeness, you're not going to see it happen because in so many cases, these people are volunteers, who are giving their time to do this. Of course, you don't want to have them subjected to a one-star rating or a two-star rating and nobody showing up in their session. In the academic world and in universities, there is at least one site that does the professor ratings. That's got to be pretty rough if you're a professor, seeing those ratings come in, but it probably keeps you on your game in a way you wouldn't otherwise.

Celisa Steele (20:05):

To your point, too, it's not the universities that are making those ratings available.

Jeff Cobb (20:10):

I suppose the same thing could spontaneously erupt in the broader conference world, but I think it's so fragmented. Nobody's seeing enough of the same speakers enough times to be able to do that other than maybe the keynotes. There's probably a "rate my keynote" site out there someplace. I don't know. But, in any case, that's quality of presenters. Then we've talked about that sense of identity and belonging. Both of these so important conference learning. The third recommendation is limit the quantity of choices.

Jeff Cobb (20:42):

We've probably all seen this. You go to these, particularly the really big, conferences and the overwhelming number of choices that those can, well, frankly be overwhelming. You make attendees spend time and mental energy choosing before they ever get to a session. It can be tough to sift through all of those choices.

Celisa Steele (20:59):

I almost think of this as a cognitive load issue. We're draining attendees mentally before a session even starts. Many attendees, as we were talking about earlier, are already stretched. When they're at a conference, they're trying to keep things at home and at the office moving along while they're away, and they're trying to be there and be attentive in the sessions. I do understand the impetus to offer a lot. It goes back to that "If you're going to have people travel, let's put as much as possible under that roof."

Celisa Steele (21:30):

You want to make sure that there's something for everyone, but I will say that in my experience when quantity is high, quality is low, at least for some of the offerings.

Jeff Cobb (21:43):

You're trying to fill a quota, I think, with the number of sessions that you're offering, and quality is bound to suffer some. I will say one thing that has been an improvement in this area, I think, at least for me it has been, is the rise of conference apps to give you the ability to go through the whole agenda and create your schedule out of it. I think that is a much better way or a way to tackle that cognitive overload and then the stress and the time that can come with having just way too many choices.

Jeff Cobb (22:17):

I think all of this probably ties back to that impetus, that drive that we all have that particularly when you gather in person, you want to provide a lot, just a lot of stuff for people to make the economics and the appeal work, but it can just so often be counterproductive.

Celisa Steele (22:36):

It occurred to me at one of the two conferences I was at recently where the ratio of bust concurrent sessions to good concurrent sessions was high—more busts than good ones—it occurred to me that I've seen the model of conference organizers using the in-person to then create a best-of online offering later. They offer all of those concurrents. Then they look at the top-rated ones from the in-person conference, and they put those online and offer those at perhaps a less price point than the full in-person conference, but they take those and put that best-of.

Celisa Steele (23:18):

I was wondering then about potentially flipping it. If I'm going to have to sit through a lackluster session, I'd rather do it at my desk, without having flown and staying in a hotel and dealing with all of that hassle. I could almost imagine, what if you tried out the sessions online, and then instead you know that you have gold going into that in-person conference because you've actually vetted it. I do get that it's very hard for conference organizers to really have individually vetted all of the concurrent sessions prior to an in-person conference.

Celisa Steele (23:53):

But if you flipped it and did it online first, you actually would indirectly have a way, through that virtual offering first, to vet those sessions and figure out which ones really are the winners.

Jeff Cobb (24:07):

That's a workaround, I think, for not having that Yelp, that rating system for presenters, if you at least have the ability to pilot them before they show up in person. It's usually a good bit more effort to get somebody there in person. There's expense involved in that, both for the organization, the organizer, and for the person who's going to be presenting. Related to this, out of the three conferences that we went to recently, the one I feel like I got by far the most out of had the fewest number of sessions by far.

Jeff Cobb (24:41):

One day of those was everybody in the same sessions together, to go back to that cohort or potential for cohort learning, shared social learning objects, that sort of thing. I'll also say with that particular conference, even though there wasn't this online first to vet people, they got people to speak at that who you knew were good speakers because you could see those people speak in many other instances. They've been on videos and Webinars. There were all sorts of

opportunities to see the people who spoke at this particular conference before they ever showed up at this conference.

Jeff Cobb (25:12):

I don't think the conference organizer had any doubt that they pretty much had rockstars in the room for most of those sessions. I won't say every one of them knocked it out of the park, but it was a much higher quality level in general across the board. I think it was a smaller experience in terms of sessions, a more shared experience for the attendees. I also say it was a smaller conference overall. It still wasn't tiny. There were hundreds of people there, but it felt like a much more manageable group of people where you could actually connect with people well.

Jeff Cobb (25:42):

I think that can be a factor. I'm not an expert in this, but I have heard tell of Dunbar's number. The number of stable, meaningful relationships we can have is 150. Of course, a stable, meaningful relationship is not necessarily what you're getting at a conference, but, still, it points to what most human beings can manage, even within the context of a conference. That particular one, after that day of everybody having shared sessions together, did split into tracks.

Jeff Cobb (26:12):

I'm betting each of those tracks was not a whole lot bigger than 150 people or so, so you had these cohorts of people going through things together, where you're starting to see the same people again and again, even though, in this case, I knew none of these people. I didn't show up with my buds that I was going to network there, that sort of thing, so I really was getting to know people anew. I think it helped that there were fewer sessions, the way the sessions were structured, and that there were fewer people at that. I think I walked out of that one having learned more than any of the other conferences that I've been to recently.

Celisa Steele (26:43):

We're going to move to the fourth recommendation. But, before we do that, I realize we should say we're not naming names when we were talking about these conferences not because we're trying to be cagey but just because we want to be able to speak freely. We're not trying to give anyone a bad name. We're just trying to pull out some general ideas and recommendations for what we think makes for an effective conference.

Jeff Cobb (27:04):

And we know people are doing their best at this, and this stuff is hard. Like we said, we've hosted and organized conferences ourselves. It is tough to get the right lineup in the right way with the right people who are really going to deliver the right stuff in a way that people are going to walk away and say, "Boy, I really learned something."

Celisa Steele (27:21):

You also have to get the right attendees there. Because, even as an organizer, even if the organizer does all of that, you still have to have the people show up willing to engage and willing to put in the mental energy and the time to really make that conference experience a learningful one. Now, back to our fourth recommendation, our fourth and final recommendation, and this is to think beyond the content. I think this gets back to the idea that part of what many people missed during COVID and the reliance on virtual was that they just missed that overall experience.

Celisa Steele (28:00):

They missed coming together. They missed what could happen in between or outside of the 50-minute sessions.

Jeff Cobb (28:08):

It jibes again with what Diane Elkins said about the content can be the same, but the experience is not going to be the same necessarily. You have to think about the conference as more than content and really think about the experience overall if you want to be as successful as possible. This doesn't mean in a showy or kitschy way. I've seen people say that speaking and presenting should be all about entertainment and really grabbing people right out of the gate. There's a place for that, but that's not really what we're talking about. Just truly making it a learning experience, something that adds up to being more than the sum of the parts.

Celisa Steele (28:53):

Right. So I don't think we're talking about what band can you get to play or what hors d'oeuvres can you have.

Jeff Cobb (28:58):

Right. Well, those are nice.

Celisa Steele (28:58):

Those are nice, but I think it's more about, again, with that learning lens on. As one example, one of the conferences I went to had on the schedule "lunch." Another one, another conference had on the schedule "lunch and networking." Now, that's subtle, and you might argue it doesn't do much, but I think it primes and persuades attendees to remember that that 90-minute block isn't only about eating. It's about making connections. It's about taking some of the sessions, ideas, and the things that you've been covering during the day and talking about those, starting to think about application.

Celisa Steele (29:38):

These are just small little things where you can help remind attendees to really think beyond just being in the sessions.

Jeff Cobb (29:48):

There really is almost a meta aspect to content, how it's positioned, or, I guess, really, it's just context. How are you creating the context for that content? You'd mentioned priming and persuading, Celisa. That's something we've talked with Bob Cialdini—the name in influence and persuasion. Just the way you say things, the elements you put around things have so much influence on how people are ultimately going to engage with them and what they're going to get out of them.

Celisa Steele (30:25):

That brings us to the end of our four recommendations. To recap, they are foster a sense of shared identity and belonging, focus on the quality of your presenters, limit the quantity of choices, and, finally, think beyond the content.

Jeff Cobb (30:49):

This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode306.

That's it for our look at learning, or not, at conferences based on a wholly unscientific sampling. For full show notes and resources mentioned in this episode, please visit leadinglearning.com/episode306.

Celisa Steele (31:05):

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Jeff Cobb (31:18):

We'd also be grateful if you take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcast, especially if you enjoy the show. Celisa and I personally appreciate those reviews and ratings, and they help the podcasts show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Just go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

Celisa Steele (31:36):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode306, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (31:48):

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

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