



Cohort-Based Learning with Shelley Osborne

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 316

Shelley Osborne: [00:00:00] So we absolutely are set on the community aspect of it. We want to bring people together and rely on the social connection of learning. We know that, when people learn together, they learn more deeply, that they make more connections, that they're able to broaden their understanding. But we also think that a cohort needs more than just a group of humans together.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:28] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:29] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. Welcome to episode 316, which features a conversation with Shelley Osborne. Shelley is head of learning experience at Modal and a return podcast guest. I spoke with her when she was vice president of learning at Udemy for episode 249. Shelley is the author of *The Upskilling Imperative: Five Ways to Make Learning Core to the Way We Work* and a self-described learner, professional enthusiast, and proud Canadian. Shelley and Celisa talk mostly about cohort-based learning what it is, its value, how to do it right, and how to scale it. They also talk about mastery, learning, psychological safety, and the future of learning. Shelley and Celisa spoke in June 2022.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:30] You have said that Modal is really focused on cohort-based learning. So I feel like maybe it would be appropriate now for us to talk about what is cohort-based learning. How do you define it or describe it?

Shelley Osborne: [00:01:42] Sure. I think cohort-based learning has a lot of definitions depending on who you're talking to. In a lot of circles, you assume a cohort is just a group of people doing any kind of learning together. And that's accurate. That is cohort-based learning. Put some people together; put them in a cohort; move them through an experience; you're good to go. At Modal, we've tried to broaden and get a little bit more advanced in our definition of it, so we absolutely are set on the community aspect of it. We want to bring people together and rely on the social connection of learning. We know that, when people learn together, they learn more deeply, that they make more connections, that they're able to broaden their

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understanding. But we also think that a cohort needs more than just a group of humans together. We've layered in pieces related to accountability and how we actually drive people from that beginning point to the end point. And then we're also really, really dead set, I said this already, but really intentional about making sure the learning outcome is achieved on the other side. And I say that because, you know, in some learning experiences that have been developed over time, there's more of a "Okay, we'll build it, and they'll come," there's more of a "Okay, let's just get them to the end, and, if they showed up, that's all they need." We've been really focused and fixated on making sure we achieve the learning outcome and that, out the door, those folks who come to that cohort-based experience can demonstrably show what they've learned and be able to put that into action at work, in their next job, in their next project. So our definition of cohorts is definitely that human bit, all those people together, plus, plus, plus.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:35] And so I think it's already coming across in some of how you're talking about cohort-based learning, and clearly your passion is coming across as well. But, if you had to explain or make a case for the value of cohort-based learning, what would you lean into, or how would you explain that value?

Shelley Osborne: [00:03:54] Yeah, I think it's interesting. Cohorts in the past have always been about let's bring people together. We know there's value there, and we need to tap into that. Learning can be really, really lonely. I'm sure you've taken some sort of course online in your life, right?

Celisa Steele: [00:04:09] Yes, yes. Many.

Shelley Osborne: [00:04:11] Many. Exactly. And there's often this moment, this point in the experience where you get stuck, and you're alone. You're all by yourself typically. And there's not really clarity on where to go get your questions answered. And you might start Googling; you might start trying to find a community; you might start trying to find others who stumbled where you stumbled. And I think that's one of the most important parts about that human side of a cohort-based learning experience. You're not alone ever. And the learning experiences we've created at Modal not only bring a group of learners together, but they bring experts, coaches, and other practitioners as a source of support and connection and help. So, when folks stumble, when they hit that block, which every learner should and will, because learning is hard, there's a way to get through that. And I think that traditional online learning experiences that are really relying on the convenience of the asynchronous nature, where someone can just do what they want at their own pace. That's great. I understand why that's so valuable, but

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there's no unlock when you hit that stumbling block, and you're going to. So I think that's one of the most powerful and impactful parts of cohort, but it's not always built into the experience, believe it or not. Often it's just, okay, let's put the people together, and magic will happen. And, yes, some good things are definitely going to happen when you put a bunch of really cool, smart human beings together. That's inevitable. But where you actually unlock and tap into the power of cohort-based learning is where you give folks the key to unlock their troubles, where they can push through the unknown, the uncertainty, and actually get that aha moment.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:59] Well, I really appreciate that idea of knowing that learning is hard. If learners are actually pushing themselves, moving beyond their current knowledge and skills, that they're likely to encounter these stumbling blocks. And so, with an intentional cohort, they have immediate access to help them get unstuck and continue to move forward. So I really appreciate that aspect of it. Part of why we wanted to have you back on the podcast is that I was fortunate enough to recently hear you present at a conference, where you were leading a session that was talking about cohort-based learning, and I was really interested in what you were sharing about some of the details and nuts and bolts of how that was working. So would you maybe share with listeners just a little bit about some of what you're doing with cohort-based learning, what that looks like in practice, in action?

Shelley Osborne: [00:06:47] Oh, absolutely. And thank you again for having me back. It's always so nice to talk with you all. So I have to say, for us, this cohort-based learning experience boils down to the three pieces, and I'll dig a little deeper on each of them. It's this connection, it's effectiveness, and it's accountability. So, if we talk about that connection, I've talked a little bit about that already. How do we create intentional places and spaces for people to really learn from one another? So I mentioned we can't just throw people in a cohort, whether that be a live experience or online, just put them in a room, a Zoom room, a real room and expect just the actual benefit of cohorts to come to life. We want to be really intentional. So some of the things that we've done with our cohort-based learning experience are creating those communities of practice where folks are able to learn from one another. They're able to see the work and projects that someone else has been doing. The experts and coaches are giving direct feedback. There's opportunities for individuals to ask questions and get them answered and get unblocked through Slack channels, through one-on-one bookings they make with coaches. At the moment they get stuck, they have a link to book a meeting with a coach and say, "Hey, walk me through this."

Shelley Osborne: [00:08:07] And that's where you really start to unlock the learning, too, because one thing that we all know is you don't have the same learner across the board walk

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into the room. You've got somebody who really understands a skill but is struggling in another area, and then look at another learner and flip it around. It's the reverse. So we have to create these environments that support that variety of skill acquisition, that different prerequisite level that's walking in, and cohorts support that, specifically when we bring those coaches in to be that guide in that moment. The next piece is really about the accountability. And I think this is, oh gosh, this is so true about learning. There's a whole bunch of us out there, people who would describe ourselves as the super motivated learners, the people who, you know, I used to spend all of my summer vacations as a teacher going and taking classes and learning even more Spanish. I think that's what I did. That was my vacation. The day school ended I was on a plane on my way to go take more classes. I'm a weirdo. I'm not your average person probably. And what's important is we need to create the conditions that drive learners through the experience. We talked earlier. You've taken a bunch of online courses. You're a super motivated learner as well. Again, that's not everybody.

Shelley Osborne: [00:09:30] There's a whole bunch of people out there who need more support and nudging. There's a quote, a tweet actually from Anna Kendrick that I've been really fond of from the pandemic. And she tweeted about how, as a result of the pandemic happening, she now can't lie to herself anymore about all the stuff she'd get done if she just had the time. And that's most people. So what we have to do is create learning experiences that pull people from point A to point B, that have those accountability metrics, that have those levers that get people to go through the experience. The cohort is one of them. The social pressure, the experience of being in it with a bunch of other people is actually critical. It makes you feel really compelled and motivated to keep up with the pack, to make sure that you're getting access to learning with others. You don't want to be left behind. But there's other ways we can do that, too, including how we pace learners, when we unlock access to the next set of material. Most online courses are just open and ready for you to work through at your own pace. That's actually demotivating for most human beings. So there's a lot we can do there to really unpack and drive folks from that starting point and get them all the way through to the end.

Shelley Osborne: [00:10:51] And then the last big piece that we really focus on building is that effectiveness. And one of the things that I as a lifelong educator have really struggled with is this idea of assessment and testing and grading. So what we've built into our cohort-based learning experience is an idea of mastery learning. So, if you don't get it right the first time, you do a project and you submit it for some feedback from a coach, and you didn't hit the mark, you get a lot of really helpful, really substantial feedback to guide you on how to revisit that work, do it again, resubmit it, and actually achieve the learning outcome. Actually achieve the skill. Acquire that ability. And you can do that endless times. Go for it. Fill your boots, as my dad

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would say. And that's actually the other thing that's really, really important. We create this condition where you're not just like a kid in high school taking your one-time test, pass or fail, oh, good or bad. The goal is to drive you through the experience to help achieve your skill acquisition and to use those dynamics of the coaches, the support, the experts, the community to help you get there, which is more associated with real-life work. That's what the real world works like.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:20] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you're looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:50] At this point, you've had a lot to do with cohort-based learning. Do you have takeaways from what works well and what works maybe not so well when it comes to designing or implementing cohort-based learning?

Shelley Osborne: [00:13:07] I mean, if I didn't, you should be worried, right? We've been doing this for a little while now, and I think there's a ton to take away. The one thing I like to point out is it is hard. This isn't an easy thing to pull off. This is a really dynamic experience. It's not as simple as recording a video of yourself talking and just publishing it as a course. That's a lot easier to do, right? This requires this multidimensional, live components, asynchronous components, this blended experience. We have interventions that are timed to support learners. We're using data and metrics that we're learning what kinds of things, what activities are more likely to indicate a learner is going to finish the experience, and then we're trying to intervene and send them nudges and support. All of that has been really, really fascinating, but there's a lot that goes into that. It's not a simple thing to pull off. There's a lot of human beings that need to pull off the whole show. There's a lot of people behind the curtain. So I'd say that's one of the biggest learnings. And it's not like that surprises me. I knew that was true. The experiences I've done like this as a learning leader within a company were also substantial and required a team to do and a lot of planning and a lot of execution. But that's even more so when we're executing this for multiple companies across many topics and lots of different learners globally.

Shelley Osborne: [00:14:41] I'd say the other really big takeaway is this balance between psychological safety and a growth mindset and how we can support that for learners who don't walk in the door with that experience. So, for example, some folks have had very traditional

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schooling experiences, and this is a totally different way of learning than they have experienced. They're looking to know, "Okay, how do I just pass this test? What do I need to do just to get this done?" And I think that associates with how education has been delivered, predominantly in North America in particular but other parts of the world as well. This idea of mastery learning is a little bit foreign, so we've learned a lot about how to create that psychological safety with learning, give people that understanding that the feedback is supportive and not meant to be critical or some sort of attack on them as a professional or as an employee. And I think that's so important. We have to battle that mindset that we're done learning when we finish college and that now we're at our jobs, and we're just supposed to be a professional. We really have to bake that in. And some of the organizations that we encounter are 100 percent there, and others, we need to help support that transition for them, and they're ready to do it, but folks need to come along the ride with us.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:15] I think it's fascinating that you mentioned the psychological safety and the growth mindset because those are really very foundational, and I think often get glossed over when designing learning experiences, maybe don't get taken into account as much as they should be. Do you have examples of what that looks like in practice? Is it as simple as saying "We're going to give you some feedback, and, upfront, know that this feedback is just to help you improve"? Is it that simple, or are there other aspects of how you create that psychological safety and foster a growth mindset?

Shelley Osborne: [00:16:46] It's that simple and more. So you have to do those little things as well. Like, I remember, gosh, this is a trip. When I had one of my very first jobs, I was working at Safeway. I was a cashier at Safeway, and I had to do a test to learn all of the produce, all of the codes that they scan, and you had to know them. You had to memorize them.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:11] Wow.

Shelley Osborne: [00:17:11] Yeah. Which, by the way, bananas are still 4011. But I remember that because I remember being a kid and being really worried that, if I failed this test, I wouldn't get to keep the job. And it turns out that was actually not true. I found out after. First of all, I made it into the Produce Recognition Hall of Fame because I studied so hard. I got like 100 percent or something on that test, which I'm still very proud of. But I did really think that my employment hinged on the success of this test. Right? And nobody made it feel safe or like, "Hey, you know you can take it again," or like, "We'll work on it."

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Shelley Osborne: [00:17:51] It just felt like high stakes to me, and, looking back, that feels comical, but it really did. And I think that there's things you can do to make that feel really, really safe and really supported. And you could talk through feedback like is fuel. I talk about that a lot, a catchphrase I've been using for years, but it's really about framing feedback as a supportive mechanism, saying, "Hey, this is to support your growth and learning," the kinds of language you use, being very careful in tone and supportive. And the way we even talk about the coaches. We talk about how the coaches are here to help you get unblocked and to help you work through challenges. And you have to thread that through all of the ways that you write about the experience, every little bit of text you use, also the verbal talk track you use in the experiences. We're very intentional as a team to have that positive, encouraging tone built through the entire experience. And I know that sounds simple, but you ensuring it's in every little thing you do is important and kind of hard.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:07] Maybe you could talk a little bit more about what the cohort-based learning looks like. And maybe it looks like different things depending on the different offerings that you have. But you're already talking about language that might be there in materials that learners are accessing maybe on their own, and then there are potentially live sessions. So could you just talk through a little bit about some of those pieces that fit together and that approach?

Shelley Osborne: [00:19:32] Yeah. So our learning experience is a blended, asynchronous and synchronous experience. Learners are set on their own to go through a platform that we've built, where we've curated and built content. We've got learning content for them to read through or watch videos, and then we have built our own proprietary practices and challenges and labs for them to work through. And then they also weekly come together for live sessions, where we either have keynote speakers and discussions or case studies or all sorts of different kinds of ways for them to connect and deepen their learning, working groups where they actually break off into groups and work on challenges that are projects together. So lots of different pieces. So, when I say this is multidimensional, dynamic experience, it's important to thread that same tone through every piece of this. So we have copy that lives in that platform that we've built, text, the labs we've created, the e-mails we send, the Slack communications that we write, the slide decks, and then the verbal talk track we use in those live sessions. All of that tone has to really be threaded through each part of that. So it's important to make sure that it feels like the same personality, the same intention behind it. And we talk about it in two ways at Modal, funfessional, which is our way of like it's professional, but it's fun and also that psychological safety, so it has to hit both sides of that coin really, so that it feels like a really

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engaging, warm place to be but also a place that is supportive and safe, and you're here to learn. And learning is making mistakes, and learning is hitting those challenging moments.

Shelley Osborne: [00:21:26] I said it earlier. It's really important that we level set folks on that too. It can feel like an attack on the ego to not be good at something, all of a sudden. I liken it to, when I was a kid, so I grew up in Canada, very cold, very snowy, and I learned how to ski really early because that's just what you do. I live in Canada. There's a lot of snow. And it was in my teenage years that snowboarding kind of became a thing, right? It was all the rage all of a sudden. All the cool kids were doing it. And I remember being in the exact same environment and suddenly being on this slightly different apparatus and being truly terrible at it. And it was an attack on the ego. It was startling. I couldn't do the thing. Or, when I first learned how to speak Spanish, I was a Spanish teacher for many years, and I am well known for being a chatty person, very talkative, and then suddenly to not be able to communicate in this language humbles you. And we have to help people understand that that's going to happen because, as adults, we don't have that same frequent learning curve. And we're not in that school environment where we're constantly being inundated with this idea of growth and learning. So we have to do that for our organizations, in organizations, in the kind of learning experiences we create and make it known to people that it's okay and that growth happens in that discomfort. That's where the sweet stuff is.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:00] Well, I can definitely identify with the snowboarding example. I did a very similar thing. I didn't start skiing as early as you did, but it wasn't until my forties when I tried snowboarding. Yeah, I think for two days I did nothing but fall. But then eventually, if you put in the time and the effort, and you put in the right effort, maybe get a little instruction then, yeah, it can really pay off.

Shelley Osborne: [00:23:22] It can. It's just so humbling though to be in that same environment and just one thing different, and now you suddenly can't do it. And that's what it feels like often learning at work because you're still in the same environment. You've got the colleagues around you that you've been working with, and then all of a sudden you're trying to pick up this new skill, and you can't do it. And it might feel a little bit like that high-stakes moment that 19-year-old Shelley—was I 19? maybe 17—Shelley had at Safeway trying to make sure she knew all the PLU codes for the fruit so she could keep the job. That's the feeling people have. So, when we bake these learning experiences, and we create them and we build them, and we add all the ingredients together, we have to make it feel like it's not a risk, like it's not the high-stakes moment where they're not going to let you work the till.

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Celisa Steele: [00:24:22] Is there an average length of time for these cohort-based learning experiences that Modal is developing?

Shelley Osborne: [00:24:29] Yeah. So we have a variety. We do things that are two weeks long all the way up to eight weeks. My standard rule—and I'm sure all the folks listening to this who are creating learning experiences on their own probably feel the same way—the content tells you what to do, right? You try to be reasonable. You try to fit into the constraints of the organizations you're partnering with and building things for. But the content ultimately tells you what's possible in any given period of time, and we're especially attuned to that due to the mastery learning we're trying to achieve. And I think in some instances we can get into this order-taking approach where someone says, "Oh, I want a two-hour this, or I want a four week that," and that's possible, I suppose, if you're just going to write some text or film a video. But, if you're actually fixated on ensuring you can walk people up to higher levels of learning (we're a Bloom's taxonomy shop) where we're taking people from that knowledge all the way up to synthesis and creation, you need a certain amount of time to be able to achieve that. So our two-week courses are achieving fewer learning outcomes. Our eight-week courses are able to do a lot more and more complex and advanced learning. But I always say the content tells me what to do. I don't tell the content what to do.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:48] And then, related question, do you have a typical number of learners that are participating in these experiences?

Shelley Osborne: [00:25:56] Yeah. We've been experimenting a lot with that because, my goodness, there's so much that can be changed by how many people you have in a cohort, right? If you think about a party, and, when you've got five people at the party, that doesn't feel like much of a party. It might be a really great dinner party. So we've been experimenting with numbers, all the way from, we've tried small, small groups going all the way up to close to 100. We definitely see some magical sweet spots in the middle there. You want to make sure it feels like there's a lot of folks there, that you're in something with a bunch of people. You want folks to be able to learn from one another. So I think we're currently really enjoying the around 50 space. But, to be transparent, more learning for us to do there.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:49] And then, related to that as well, is there a sweet spot on the number of coaches or the ratio of coaches to students?

Shelley Osborne: [00:26:59] Yeah, you know, that's a good question. We've been playing with that number as well. We haven't cracked the nut there yet. What we know is that, when we get

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folks talking to coaches early in the experience, they access them more frequently. We learned a little bit about the fact that there's that moment where, again, back to that ego, we need to give folks the willingness and the ability to say like, "Hey, it's okay to reach out. This person is here to support you." So we haven't totally figured out exactly how many we need. We're probably running ratios of one coach to, oh gosh. You know what? I don't even know the exact number, so I don't want to lie to you. But what's most important is that you get folks talking to them early because then they use them the whole time.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:52] Right, and that might then change the ratio that's needed.

Shelley Osborne: [00:27:55] Exactly.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:57] Okay. Well, no, thank you for digging in with some of those nuts and bolts. You mentioned earlier that doing cohort-based learning, doing it well, is hard. And so the answer to this question might just be that it's hard. But I'm curious, given all these potential advantages of cohort-based learning, why don't we see more of it? Are there barriers to designing and implementing it that are maybe slightly more specific than just it's hard?

Shelley Osborne: [00:28:24] Well, I mean, it is hard. So that is part of the answer. But I think that's overly simplistic just to leave it at that. I think that we do see cohort-based learning experiences happen, but they are often sort of one-offs, right? We'll see organizations build their own in-house experience, and it'll be for one topic or one skill, and that tends to be because it's difficult. It requires a lot of moving parts and operational capacity to do all of this stuff. So I think that's a big part of the challenge there. To do it well, to actually really tap into the potential of why cohorts are useful, you need to have this surround sound, all-encompassing, really dynamic experience, multidimensional, that isn't just throwing a bunch of people on one Zoom. And I think that's a big part of it. I also think that we've been a little bit, I guess, stuck with our approach from a technology perspective. I think obviously the pandemic has been a really challenging time, but it has forced us to think more carefully and intentionally about how we use technology to create great learning experiences. We were kind of stalled out. We were just turning the camera on and recording stuff and just trying to be super efficient with learning. And, yeah, that was efficient, but it wasn't really achieving learning outcomes. So I think we're in this moment where we're realizing, you know, easy doesn't get the job done, and we have to actually do these harder things and figure out how to do them well, in scalable ways to actually achieve our real learning goals.

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Celisa Steele: [00:30:19] Well, that's interesting that you mentioned scalability there at the end because that does seem like that's probably part of the issue, that even when you can design something that's very effective and not just efficient, then replicating that over and over could be difficult. So I think that scalability piece is interesting.

Shelley Osborne: [00:30:41] Yeah, it's absolutely the magic thing that needs to be unlocked. And I think that's why organizations that do it in house are only really able to support one thing, maybe, because they've also got everything else on their plate. They're not typically charged with just doing this one program. They probably have like 10 or 15 priorities that they're working on throughout the year, so it's hard to keep that steady drumbeat of these experiences going.

Celisa Steele: [00:31:09] So I think we've already heard a lot of lessons learned in what you've been sharing so far, but I don't want to miss out on a chance to ask you what advice you might share with learning businesses that are looking to really add cohort-based learning, have it be this meaningful part of what they do and offer out to their customers and their learners.

Shelley Osborne: [00:31:30] You know, I think my biggest piece of advice is helping people push past the ego. The growth mindset and that learning agility, that seems so abstract, but it's so necessary. It's really the thing that powers the learners through it. If that's not done, you'll only ever achieve so much.

Celisa Steele: [00:31:56] I think that's a refreshing perspective, and especially I can imagine if, as a learning business, you're offering these other things that maybe are higher stakes and really are more of "Here's your one shot, really do your studying, prepare" and then to switch into this different mode and really have this focus on mastery learning, it could require, exactly as you're saying, clear messaging about "This is how this works, and this is why it works, and it might be different than some of the other things in our portfolio." So far we've been focusing on cohort-based learning, but you have a long career in learning. You referenced being a lifelong instructor, teaching Spanish and other things. So I'm just curious to pick up more broadly and ask you how you describe the state of lifelong learning, continuing education, professional development today.

Shelley Osborne: [00:32:57] My goodness. It's kind of amazing to think about what's happening right now in the wake of, you know, gosh, we're definitely seeing some massive macroeconomic factors, right? We're hearing tales of potential recessions, and there's massive inflation. And there's been a lot of companies who've been doing RIFs and layoffs. And we've

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just come out of—have we come out of?—we’re in the midst still of a pandemic. And what is fascinating to me above all is that learning wasn’t on the chopping block the way it was in previous versions of this story. If you think about other big crashes, learning was really immediately what was cut. It was the first thing to go, and that didn’t happen this time. In fact, in the real heat of the pandemic, there was a huge surge in learning and development roles because organizations were having to figure out how to ultimately determine their new future, support these hybrid models, really guide folks through this experience. So I think we’re in this moment that is unusual for those of us who’ve been in the learning space for a long time. We’re not the first to go. We’re business-critical to support these changes, this digital transformation, these massive challenges that organizations are facing. They see learning and development as a way to move through it. And I think that that is—while it’s through the midst of some very challenging times for us as individuals, as society, as organizations—it is a bright light to know that the work that we’re all doing as either learning businesses or within organizations is absolutely supporting this moment. It’s helping guide through this time. And I think that’s exciting for us. It’s an opportunity for us to help create this future of work, to help move organizations forward, to support upskilling in resource-strapped companies that are going to have to do hiring freezes or not be able to really bring in a lot more folks. So there’s an opportunity here for us to rise to the occasion. And I think that is a first for us, truly.

Celisa Steele: [00:35:32] When you think about the future of learning, what comes to mind? Are there trends or developments that you’re watching more closely than others?

Shelley Osborne: [00:35:42] Hmm. I mean, I’m obviously in the thick of this, so you can call me super biased, but the cohort movement is a thing. We’re not the only ones thinking and talking about this, and I think we’ve got a great approach to it. But I think the biggest trend I’m seeing is we had these incredible first steps, and there’s these waves of innovation that have been happening, particularly in educational technology where we have been through these transitions. And I think we’re on a next wave where we really do need to tap into the effectiveness. I’m hearing more and more folks really want to ensure that the learning experiences we’re creating achieve those learning outcomes, the business strategy that has been set out. And I think that’s important. It’s been a missing part of some of the conversation. We haven’t always been operating as strategically. It was just sort of order-taking or creating workshops or doing the thing just because it was asked. We now need to be very intentional and very effective with the experiences that we’re creating and ensure that they get people to higher levels of skill acquisition and achievement. And I know that sounds, again, very obvious, but we have gone through these phases where it was just the inception of this online learning and e-learning, and then we started to move into the efficiency of it, like, oh, it was going to be

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cost-saving, and it was going to take less time, and we wouldn't have to pull people all around the country, and that kind of thing. And now we're like, okay, yeah, but we really need to make sure that what we do, whether it be as efficient or what, has to actually ensure people are learning better and more through our interventions.

Celisa Steele: [00:37:37] Anything else on your mind that we haven't yet had a chance to talk about?

Shelley Osborne: [00:37:43] You know, I think the other thing that needs to be said is we're seeing some massive changes in the way higher education is being considered. For the first couple of years, we're seeing decreases in enrollment in colleges. That's related to the fact that some of those institutions had a hard time transitioning into the online education space. But it's also been a bit of a trend we've been seeing come as colleges were not setting folks up with all the skills they needed on the job. A lot of upskilling was required once folks walked into the doors of their companies. We know that the half-life of a skill is less than five years. Even with a great college degree—and, believe me, I'm very, very fond of the experiences I had in both my undergrad and my master's—that's still never going to be enough. We have to do a lot of learning in our lifetime. So we're seeing organizations being far more forward-thinking about how they create internal or partner with external learning vendors to upskill the folks in their organizations to recruit talent and build them from day one with the skills that they need. And it's been a growing trend, but it is hitting a absolute peak moment as a result of a lot of these very external factors but also just a growing need. So I think that's an important part of the conversation and knowing that there's a ton of opportunity there that we need to support because the classic, traditional way is not doing it.

Celisa Steele: [00:39:30] What occurs to me, after hearing you share that, is I feel like sometimes what gets touted from the university or college experience is the social aspect. And here we have cohort-based learning, which, when done right, really provides a social aspect. Of course on colleges and universities, the social aspect is not always around learning, but it is at least in part around learning as well.

Shelley Osborne: [00:39:56] Well, you know, there's a really interesting article about mere belonging and this idea that even a simple social connection actually improves your performance and learning experiences is critical. While you talk about those experiences in college not always being educational, feeling like you belong somewhere or having a connection with other individuals at the institution supported that college kid's learning because they had that pal they met in the dorm, or they made it on the track team, and they

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were a part of something, or they buddied up with the librarian and would say hi to him every time they came to study. That is shockingly useful in supporting performance and learning experiences. And I think that's what people have been really missing. It's tough to prove. It seems sort of flippant, or it doesn't seem important, but it really is. And I don't know, after a few years of a pandemic, I think we all know the connections that we've lost or that we haven't been able to have. We've felt it. It's impacted us.

Jeff Cobb: [00:41:13] Shelley Osborne is head of learning experience at Modal and author of *The Upskilling Imperative: Five Ways to Make Learning Core to the Way We Work*. You'll find a link to the Modal Web site and Shelley's LinkedIn profile in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode316.

Celisa Steele: [00:41:30] At leadinglearning.com/episode316, you'll also see options for subscribing to the Leading Learning Podcast, and we would be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as subscriptions give us some data on the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:41:47] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Celisa and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they also help the show pop up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

Celisa Steele: [00:42:05] Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. At leadinglearning.com/episode316, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:42:15] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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