Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Social learning is effective, natural, and newly attractive and relevant in the current lessening-pandemic moment. That sums up why learning businesses should think strategically about what they do with social learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:18] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:19] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:28] Welcome to episode 329 of the Leading Learning Podcast. This is the seventh episode in our informal series on tools for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:38] And so far in that series, we've talked about the Value Ramp, the Market Insight Matrix, the Product Value Profile, the Learning Engagement Loop, the MIDDLE ME learning product lifecycle, and, most recently, learning culture and learning ecosystem snapshots. You can find links to all of our past tool talks in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode329. Today we'll add to the offering of practical tools and social learning objects that can inspire and inform discussion among your team by looking at four dimensions of social learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:15] And we'll come back to the specific visual we have in mind, but to use the same why-what-how framework we've used with other tools in this series, we'll first talk about why social learning is important for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:30] The simplest explanation of why social learning is important is because social learning is effective. Humans are social beings, and we learn tremendous amounts by watching others, by imitating others. Babies learning to walk and talk, that's the classic example of this. But that same kind of observation-plus-trial approach really serves us as humans well into adulthood. It's at the root of job shadowing and some other types of on-the-job kinds of training.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:02:02] And, to sum up what you just said, Celisa, social learning is both effective and natural for humans. And I'll add that, in the particular case of learning businesses, it's something that they are usually well positioned to do. Learning businesses are often structured around serving a profession or industry or field, and so they often have practitioners of varying skill levels and experience levels or different areas of emphasis. So, by bringing those people together, very often people can learn from one another.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:36] And that makes me realize we should probably offer a definition of "social learning," just to be clear what we have in mind. And, for us, social learning covers the transfer of knowledge, ideas, and skills that happens when humans interact with one another. Now, that's a pretty broad definition, and we'll unpack it a bit more when we get into the four dimensions in a moment. But, for now, just to have that big, broad definition in mind. Social learning is the transfer of knowledge, ideas, and skills that happens when humans interact.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:07] And the interaction piece of social learning is fundamental, and that social interaction was of course curtailed and changed by the COVID-19 pandemic. So that's another answer to why learning businesses should care about social learning. Social learning is arguably even more attractive as the pandemic lessens and it becomes safer to gather together physically. There's pent-up demand for social learning. Not that it wasn't happening online, but it's just different in person. And there's a business opportunity if you can figure out how to satisfy that demand.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:41] Right. I was going to point out that social learning doesn't have to happen in person. That pent-up demand may be in particular for the in-person type of social learning, but the pandemic did also show us that we can gather and connect and learn together in online spaces as well as physical spaces.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:00] Social learning is effective, natural, and newly attractive and relevant in the current lessening-pandemic moment. That sums up why learning businesses should think strategically about what they do with social learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:17] 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

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services. If you are looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:52] Now that we've explored why a learning business should care about social learning, let's look at what the Social Learning Mixer is. And that involves taking a closer look at how social learning can happen, the different flavors of social learning, which are driven by four key dimensions.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:09] The four dimensions that we have in mind are immediacy, structure, scale, and transparency. So let's talk a little bit about each one, and let's start with immediacy. There's a continuum for social learning that runs from direct and instant involvement of learners to delayed and indirect exchanges. The direct and instant end covers things like informal face-to-face conversations that might happen before a place-based workshop, as well as the group work that a facilitator has learners do in small groups during that place-based workshop. So that's an example—or those are two examples of the direct and instant end of immediacy.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:52] And the delayed and indirect end could cover things like discussion forums. So someone posts in an online community looking for recommendations on, say, how to embed design thinking in their learning business, and they're looking for general help. They don't have a specific recipient in mind. And it's possible that someone six months from now who's thinking about design thinking will find that thread and mine it and find valuable help. So that's a delayed and indirect example of immediacy.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:23] The second dimension is structure, and structure can be more or less apparent in social learning. That is, social learning can be more or less formal. And, as this dimension makes clear, social learning is not necessarily informal learning. It may be, but informal and social learning are not synonymous. They don't necessarily go hand in hand.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:45] On the less structured end of social learning, a learning business might match a mentor to a mentee, and that's the extent of the design of that social learning. Or we can take a more structured approach to social learning. Maybe we provide mentors and mentees with a set of activities and questions to work through and provide a timeline for meetings and working through those activities and questions.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:09] The third dimension is scale. Social learning can be small scale or massive. So, at one extreme, social learning need only involve two people. The mentor-mentee

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example you just gave, Jeff, that's a simple two-person social learning approach. Now at the other end social learning can include thousands, even millions of learners. When Stephen Downes and George Siemens offered arguably the first MOCC (massive open online course) back in 2008, it was a course called "Collectivism and Connective Knowledge," and they had over 2,200 learners who signed on. So that was an example of some massive social interaction taking place in the context of that MOOC. Another example—Coursera's "Learning How to Learn" with Barb Oakley, who's been on the podcast before. that MOOC has had more than 3.3 million enrollments so far, and the course is still running, still welcoming more learners. That number is going to just keep going up.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:09] Yeah, those scaled experiences really are interesting. I was actually in that first MOOC back in 2008, and I can remember even with 2,000+ people in there, there was a ton of social interaction and definitely a ton of social learning going on in that. Now most businesses probably won't get that large-scale with their social learning, but it's interesting to think about scaling it. Even a two-person mentorship experience can be scaled, and we know organizations that are doing that by leveraging technology and algorithms to match partners and to provide the structure. So, for example, Veronica Diaz, who's been on the show, has talked to us about how they're trying to scale mentoring at EDUCAUSE, so taking that one-on-one social learning and bringing it to a larger scale.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:57] The last of our four dimensions is transparency. Transparency has to do with how aware the learners are about the social aspect of the learning experience. Transparency relates to the first two dimensions we talked about. It relates to immediacy and structure. The more immediate and the more structured the social learning, the more likely learners are to see how the learning is social. But we include transparency as a separate dimension because, even in the case of immediate and structured social learning, designers get to decide whether to forefront what they're doing in a particular learning experience that support social learning or whether to be more opaque and bake the social learning in without calling attention to it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:41] Right. So one facilitator might simply tell learners to look at other learners' projects and provide a comment. Another might tell the learners that giving and getting feedback is an important part of learning and that they can learn not only from the comments they get on their project and not only from the comments they give but also from comments that their peers provide on other learners' projects. In essence, that second facilitator is priming learners for the social learning by calling attention to it in a meta kind of way.

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Celisa Steele: [00:10:14] In that tale of two facilitators, Jeff begins to get at what I think tends to be probably the biggest issue when it comes to designing social learning. Like that first facilitator, we may be underthink it. Maybe because we know social learning is how so many skills and so much knowledge is shared, maybe that makes us assume that all we have to do is provide a way for two or more learners to connect and put them in the same room or add them to the same online community, and then, voila, social learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:48] Yeah. We see that kind of thing all the time, I think, in conference sessions, where people are just told to talk among themselves and something magic is going to come out of it. But often you do need that bit of scaffolding and structure around it. You need a social learning object that's meaningful to them to interact around. And that does take some planning, even if you are going to make it—probably especially if you're going to make it—completely transparent to the learner. You really need to have thought through what are you trying to achieve here and how are you actually setting them up for success. And, if we go back to the structure dimension for a moment, we said that structure runs from less structure to more structure. And there's a big difference between no structure and even just a bit of structure, a bit of scaffolding to help social interactions actually contribute to learning transfer and a deeper understanding of concepts and ideas.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:42] And underthinking social learning tends to lead to learning businesses and learning designers focusing on social learning tools rather than social learning philosophy. So we tend to worry about which tools to use for social learning. We worry about picking the right one. And the assumption that's built into that is that if you have the right tool or tools, social learning will happen naturally. And that's simply just not usually the case.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:17] We've talked about why social learning is important and what social learning is, talking about those four dimensions that you can turn up or down depending on the context, your audience, and your goals. And so now let's turn to how to design effective social learning, given that simply having community software or other options in place usually isn't enough.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:40] And this is where an awareness of the four dimensions is key. Just knowing to think about immediacy, structure, scale, and transparency is an important first step in helping you design effective social learning. Once you know about the four dimensions, then you and your team can make conscious and hopefully strategic decisions about each dimension, given the audience and given the goals for a particular learning experience.

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Celisa Steele: [00:13:07] And each dimension is a spectrum. Immediacy ranges from direct and instantaneous to indirect and delayed. So at the one end you have the in-person, real-time exchanges with others. At the other end you have exchanges that may happen via online discussion boards that happen more according to individuals' schedules, meaning that a response might take a day or a week or even a month to come through.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:33] Or a podcast like the Leading Learning Podcast could be at the more delayed and indirect end of immediacy. Structure ranges from informal to highly organized. Informal might involve building in time for peer networking during a learning experience but largely leaving what peers talk about up to them. Or on that highly organized end you might do work up front to identify which peers would benefit from talking with each other and create custom discussion groups along with suggested questions or topics for them to cover.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:09] Scale, that dimension can range from one-on-one social exchanges to those massive, large-group interactions—this is the MOOC example that we mentioned earlier.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:19] And that last dimension transparency ranges from covert to overt. In the case of covert, the social learning aspect of a learning experience is there, but it's not emphasized. No one is calling the learners' attention to it. In the case of overt, the social learning is emphasized and attention is called to it. Maybe it's even a key selling point for the learning experience.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:43] So those are the endpoints on the four dimensions. But, of course, you can land anywhere along the spectrum for each dimension. For scale, for example, your only choices aren't one-on-one or millions of learners. You might have smaller or larger groups anywhere along that spectrum.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:02] So each dimension is really a slider that you can adjust to yield the desired mix. And this is where our tool for this episode comes in: the Social Learning Mixer. And you can find the mixer visual in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode329, but we'll describe it for you here.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:23] Now, as with so many of our tools, it's a pretty simple visual. You can imagine an asterisk made up of four lines, and that gives you eight points. So each of those lines represents one of the four dimensions that we've talked about. And then you have the endpoints at either end of that line, and then you can put a dot to indicate where along the spectrum for each of those dimensions you fall. So, in the case of scale, maybe it's a small-group

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thing, so you'll be a little close to the one-on-one end. You won't be all the way on the massive end of that dimension. And you can put a dot there to indicate it. Similarly, you can do the same thing with all of the other dimensions for a particular learning product or a product line if you have a group of similarly designed and similarly structured offerings. And then, by plotting those dots, you'll have a visual that represents the social learning mix for that product or product line.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:27] And so this tool is, like many of the others, really a way to get meaningful conversation started about social learning and to provide a framework so that everyone involved is thinking about common dimensions of social learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:42] And then, beyond starting conversation, you can also use it to analyze what you're currently doing. That is, you can use it to assess your existing offerings. You can plot out the points, as I was just talking about there, to give you that visual representation of the mix of social learning so you can look at how are you using social learning in each of your products. You can inventory your use of social learning in those products according to those four dimensions of immediacy, structure, scale, and transparency. And then, once you've done that, it can be very interesting to say, "Do you see patterns?" If all your social learning is very loosely structured or done on a large scale, that may suggest an opportunity to experiment at other points on those dimensions. Maybe you see no patterns when you've done your assessment and inventory. That might suggest that your organization needs to be more holistically aware of social learning, so that what's working for one product could be applied to another product. Are there potentially products that you can't even adequately inventory, you can't even create a visual for it because you really don't know enough about what happens? This could be the case in some of your face-to-face concurrent sessions at a conference, for example, where maybe all you're doing is picking a presenter and a topic, and it's based on a two- to four-sentence description, and you don't really know what happens in the room.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:08] Yeah, and this can be a good tool to make your presenters aware of as well, so they're actually thinking about this when it comes to things like their conference sessions. And, as you inventory what you're doing, you can also assess the effectiveness of your products in terms of social learning. So, for each product, what is the learning outcome that you're trying to achieve? An awareness of the context can help you assess whether the current mix of immediacy, structure, scale, and transparency is appropriate. For example, in the context of set curricula or exam prep, the social learning may be more highly structured to allow it to speak to that curriculum or that exam content. In the context of learning focused at the higher end of Bloom's taxonomy, so synthesis and evaluation, the social learning may be smaller in scale and

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more immediate to get learners really engaged and deep into the learning activity and the material. There are no value judgments, no across-the-board right or wrong approaches. You have to think through what each product is trying to do, what you're trying to achieve with each experience. And then how would you rate the effectiveness of your educational products and their use of social learning?

Celisa Steele: [00:19:25] And, Jeff, you just said there are no value judgments, and I think that's worth emphasizing. In offering these four dimensions, we're just trying to offer a way to look at social learning in its many incarnations, but no particular point along any of the four dimensions is inherently better than any other. It's not necessarily better for social learning to happen on a large scale or to be more immediate. It's not de facto better for social learning to be less structured or more transparent. It all depends on what you're trying to achieve. It depends on your goals, and it depends on what your audience needs and wants and is capable of responding to.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:06] Definitely. And you can use the Social Learning Mixer to assess existing products, but, of course, you can also use it when designing new products or revising existing products as you're trying to identify and represent the ideal mix of each dimension.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:22] And to help you get better at determining what type of social learning might work best for what goals and which audiences, take some time to experience social learning as a learner. What social learning are you experiencing beyond what your organization offers? (If you're even experiencing what your organization offers in that way.) Take time to try out social learning, both social learning that's similar to what your organization is doing or trying to do and social learning that's different from what you're doing. And, if you're being a thoughtful social learner, you're bound to pick up some ideas and tools that may apply to what your organization offers or what it will offer in the future.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:05] And all the activities we've mentioned—inventorying what you're currently doing, assessing its effectiveness, trying out other social learning—all of that's going to help your learning business get better at designing and delivering effective social learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:26] So that's our look at the Social Learning Mixer. You can find the mixer visual in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode329.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:21:36] At Leadinglearning.com/episode329, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we hope you will subscribe if you haven't yet. Subscription numbers give us some insight into what impact the podcast is having.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:50] We'd also be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Jeff and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:05] Lastly, please be social, and spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode329, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:18] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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

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