



Preparing for 2023

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 338

Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] And, in addition to asking yourself about your priorities, also ask if your priorities are clear throughout your learning business. Is everyone on the team aware of and crystal clear on your priorities for the year ahead?

Celisa Steele: [00:00:19] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:20] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. Welcome to episode 338 of the Leading Learning Podcast, our first episode of 2023. And so we want to focus on what the new year may hold for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:41] This episode is a companion to episode 335 that aired in December. In that episode, we reflected back on 2022. Here we'll look ahead. Hopefully you've already been strategizing and preparing for the year ahead, but we hope our conversation will be a further encouragement to you to be thoughtful about your learning business's priorities for 2023.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:05] To help us look at the year ahead, we'll draw on data we collected via an online survey in October and November 2022. We received qualifying responses from 155 organizations, learning businesses of all types—that is, organizations that sell continuing education, professional development, and other types of lifelong learning experiences to adult learners. And respondents included charitable or philanthropic organizations, educational institutions, for-profit businesses, and associations, which were the largest segment of the respondents, about 41 percent.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:42] We asked those survey respondents to let us know which of 15 areas of activities they're already pursuing, planning to pursue in 2023, or not planning to pursue. So let's go over those 15 areas that we asked about. One, Creation of learning experiences that combine online elements with face-to-face elements. Two, implementation of technologies that leverage artificial intelligence to support or enhance learning. Three, microlearning opportunities. Four, providing a personalized learning experience. Five, creation of social, peer-to-peer, or cohort-based learning experiences. Six, use of virtual reality or augmented reality to

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provide new learning experiences or enhance existing experiences. Seven, use of blockchain as an approach to managing records related to learning or certification and credentialing. Eight, use of virtual conferences, and we defined a virtual conference as an online event similar to a traditional face-to-face conference. So single Webinars do not count.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:55] So those are the first eight areas, and the other areas are, nine, new or alternative approaches to credentialing, including certificate programs, microcredentials, and digital badges. Ten, aligning offerings with specific career or job paths relevant to learners, for example, through a competency model, learning pathways, or targeted curriculum. Eleven, integration of educational offerings into the learning and development programs of employers in a field or industry or into general workforce development needs. Twelve, development of strategies or tactics to help combat declining enrollments, downward price pressure, or commoditization of educational offerings. Thirteen, increased efforts to gather and analyze data to inform new product decisions or improve existing products. Fourteen, increased efforts to gather and analyze data that demonstrates the impact or effectiveness of the learning experiences offered. And, finally the last area, implementation of methods to ensure that learning is retained and applied over time. That's number fifteen.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:07] So that's a lot. I think we need to pause and take a deep breath here.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:10] Definitely.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:11] But those fifteen areas, they obviously cover a lot of ground. But there are other areas that we could have asked about. And so I think it would be good if we shared a bit about how we arrived at these fifteen areas.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:23] That's right. We didn't we didn't pull them out of thin air. We asked about these areas in an end-of-year survey last year and the year before, so 2020 and 2021. And we developed the list way back in 2018, and, to develop the list originally, we took sort of a modified crowdsourcing approach. We first reached out to thoughtful, smart people, practitioners and experts, those working in learning businesses and the vendors and consultants working with them, and generated a list of trends and then, folding in our own observations and thoughts, we arrived at the list of fifteen.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:03] So, listener, what's top of the list for your learning business to tackle this year? What are your priorities? It might be something in the list of the fifteen areas that we mentioned, or it might be something else. And I will say that you can find that list of fifteen

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areas in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode338. Before we share some data from the survey on those fifteen areas, you might want to pause—literally hit pause on the podcast—and think about your own priorities and which of these areas, if any, are on your radar and which are you likely to act on in the coming year. And, in addition to asking yourself about your priorities, also ask if your priorities are clear throughout your learning business. Is everyone on the team aware of and crystal clear on your priorities for the year ahead?

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:01] As someone who listens to the Leading Learning Podcast, you should know about the Leading Learning newsletter, which you can subscribe to at leadinglearning.com/inbox. The newsletter is inbox intelligence for learning businesses and helps you understand the latest technology, marketing, and learning trends and grow your learning business. Best of all, it's a free resource. As a subscriber, you'll get Leading Links, our monthly curated collection of resources to help you grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business; the podcast digest, a monthly summary of podcast episodes released during the previous month; plus periodic announcements highlighting Leading Learning Webinars and other educational opportunities designed to benefit learning business professionals. Subscribe for free at leadinglearning.com/inbox. And, if you're already subscribed, point a colleague to leadinglearning.com/inbox.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:02] Now that you've maybe paused and done some thinking on your own, I'll share that we saw six of these fifteen areas either being pursued or planning to be pursued in 2023 by 78 percent or more of responding organizations. And at the top of that list is increased efforts to gather and analyze data to inform new product decisions or improve existing products, with a whopping 93 percent of respondents already doing this or planning to in 2023. And then second was another data area: increased efforts to gather and analyze data that demonstrates the impact or effectiveness of the learning experiences we offer. And 89 percent said they're already doing that or planning to in 2023. And this, by the way, was an item that came in seventh last year, so it moved up.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:56] And I think it's worth noting that those top two areas—data for product decisions and data to show impact—are also the areas where more than half of respondents plan to begin work in 2023. The other top six areas that we're going to get to in a minute have larger segments already doing the work. These two data areas are the ones that represent the highest new activity among respondents.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:21] Yeah, it was interesting to see, and we'll talk a little bit in a minute about why that might be. But, obviously, data has been a buzz area for years now, data and analytics, particularly around being able to demonstrate impact. But we know from our experience that, in a lot of cases, learning is being put out there without really any thoughtful, intentional way of measuring impact, getting the data that shows that we actually move the dial with the learning experiences. And, of course, on the other end of the spectrum, data should be informing as the questions asked, how products are designed, which products, are even determined to offer in the first place but then how they're designed, how they're developed. And we also know from a lot of experience that oftentimes a committee is coming up with an idea, or a few people have a good idea in an organization and will create a product and put it out there. And it's kind of a shot in the dark because there isn't any sort of broader data informing those decisions.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:21] And I think, too, that in these top areas, there's perhaps a suggestion of richer data, of data that can give better insight and actually help determine future direction. So it's not just how many people enrolled or what did they score in a particular test. I think it's really about what data can you get that gives you a fuller picture of what the market needs, how the learners are responding and interacting with what you're offering. And so it really does then become this tool that you can use to inform decision-making in a meaningful way. So let's get back to the survey data and the top six areas. Third, we have creation of learning experiences that combine online elements with face-to-face elements, and 82 percent were already doing it or planning to in 2023. And I don't think that seems too surprising given that we're emerging from the COVID pandemic and gathering face to face again seems reasonable. But learners also saw firsthand the convenience and effectiveness of online learning. So combining online and face-to-face just seems really logical.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:28] Yeah, definitely. The fourth is providing a personalized learning experience with a combined 82 percent either already doing it or starting to in 2023. And, again, not too surprising. Personalization has long been a sort of holy grail of learning, and adult learners seem increasingly intolerant of experiences that waste their time and money by covering ground that they already know.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:55] The final two in the top six are creation of social, peer-to-peer, or cohort-based learning experiences and microlearning opportunities, both of those with about 79 percent doing or planning work in those areas. And, again, I think there's a logic to those being among the top areas. The peer-to-peer and cohort-based learning, that fits very nicely with the hunger for social connection that the pandemic really deepened. And then microlearning speaks to what you were just saying, Jeff, about adult learners being increasingly intolerant of

experiences that waste their time and money. Microlearning respects learners time, and, because of its tight focus, it really allows learners to pick relevant topics and skip irrelevant ones.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:44] Based on the survey data and our own observations, we'll offer three takeaways and some implications of each. The first we're calling innovation at the edges, meaning that, at least for the foreseeable future, product innovation for learning businesses is likely to be much more about meaningful but incremental changes to well-established models than about bold leaps forward or blue oceans. The reality is that the range of what most learning businesses can offer has been pretty much the same for quite some time now. The shift to online was a disruptor once upon a time. But, even before COVID, online learning was pretty much an established fact, and it certainly is now. So that leaves us with the question of how do we get better at and generate more value from the usual fare—those courses, conferences, Webinars, assessments, communities, and so on.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:39] Yeah, I think that's a really good question to ask. How do you get better at what you're already offering and generate more value? And I think answering that question may be one of the drivers of the focus that we see in the survey results on data to inform product decisions. We need that data to know where and how we can make meaningful changes that will help us better meet learner and employer needs.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:06] Right. And the interest in areas like social and cohort-based learning are arguably also evidence of this shift towards innovation at the edges. These are hardly new approaches, but figuring out how to do them better and then show the impact—and, again, that's through data—may give a learning business the edge it needs in its particular market.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:26] And I think the economy is also a factor in this takeaway, innovation at the edges. In shaky, uncertain economic times, there is often less of an appetite for bold moves, and there's more of a desire to make what we have work. And there's this pressure to make sure that any new initiatives, that we get those right the first time. And, again, that brings us back to having the data necessary to make well-informed decisions. And, because innovation at the edges is likely to be highly data-dependent, I think it's worth noting here that it is harder and harder to get prospects or even existing customers and learners to provide data through traditional means, like surveys. We touched on this back in episode 335. There are just so many businesses now trying to get us—us meaning everyone—to respond to a survey, to rate our experience. And, partly because of the dwindling trust issue that we also talked about in episode 335, I think consumers are increasingly asking themselves why a business needs that

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data or is asking about that information. And I think consumers are also increasingly concerned about the safety and privacy of their data, which then leads to making them reluctant to provide that data.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:52] Yes, we're going to have to get increasingly thoughtful and strategic about how we're able to get data. And identifying baked-in ways to collect data is going to be increasingly important and then, of course, making good use of that data as the basis for these small innovations we're talking about.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:10] Right. And by "baked-in ways," I think you have in mind, rather than a survey that someone has to fill out, it's more about what can you see from their behavior and clickstream data or whatever it is, but it's something that you're just kind of observing what's already happening. But that's important data, and it doesn't necessarily require you to make an ask of a consumer or a user.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:28] Yeah. We're all about behavioral data anyway. We emphasize that in the research that we do as part of consulting. But you've got to think about that. How are you going to determine what are the behaviors you're looking for, and how do you actually get the data about those behaviors and then start to use it?

Celisa Steele: [00:15:44] So that's the first takeaway: innovation at the edges. The second takeaway is blended learning's rebirth. We're betting that we'll see a renewed interest in and use of blended learning in 2023 and beyond.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:00] Yeah, we may already be seeing it. We've been talking and thinking and writing about blended learning a lot lately. But, as a reminder, our definition of blended learning draws on the work of the Christensen Institute and its Blended Learning Universe, and it says that blended learning is a formal education program which meets three criteria. First, students learn in part through online learning with some element of student control over time, place, path, and/or pace. Next, students learn in part in a brick-and-mortar location where instruction is facilitated. And then, third, the online and offline modalities are connected to provide an integrated learning experience.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:45] And this blended learning takeaway is supported by at least two of those top six areas that we saw in the survey data. I'm thinking in particular of combining online and face-to-face elements in learning experiences and social, peer-to-peer, and cohort-based learning experiences. The in-person component of blended learning fits well with this

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pent-up hunger for social connection that's come from the pandemic, mentioned that a little bit earlier. The online piece speaks to learner convenience and the ability to have more flexibility about when and/or how and where to learn. And I think that's a convenience that many people got used to during the pandemic and work-from-home situations. And I also think that the online piece helps lessen the environmental impact of in-person learning, which often requires travel. And I think there will be increasing scrutiny of the environmental impact of learning going forward.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:47] And each mode, of course, has advantages on its own. As you just pointed out, Celisa, combining in-person and online creates the opportunity really for greater effectiveness than either mode alone can achieve. And it leverages some really compelling and appealing benefits of each mode. And, for a deeper discussion of the benefits of blended learning, we recommend our executive briefing "Why and How to Build Your Blended Learning Playbook," which you can get at leadinglearning.com/blended.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:20] Blended learning also can help create loyal customers, loyal learners, loyal members, and that speaks to that dwindling trust issue that we raised in episode 335. As humans, we tend to trust and like people that we're in relationship with, and blended learning puts learners in relationships with each other. And then the learning business, as the organizer of that blended experience, it's going to benefit from that trust created in those relationships as well.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:51] So that's the second takeaway: blended learning's rebirth. Our third and final takeaway is something we're calling business remodels. And if you see this in print, you'll see that we've been oh so clever in putting the re, R-E, in parentheses so that this can be read as business models or business remodels. And this is because organizations that may not have ever had to give too much thought to their business model will need to start. And even those that have given a lot of thought to their business models may have some rethinking to do. They may need to remodel those business models.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:27] In uncertain economic times and in times of high inflation like we're in currently, spending can be tight, and that, of course, impacts what individuals and organizations are able and willing to spend on things. And those things include learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:43] Right. And that's the bad news, of course. The better news is that, currently in the U.S., we have a lot of job vacancies, so reskilling, upskilling, and onboarding are needed even more now. And we touched on this in episode 335. All of this points to the need to

find those small innovations that increase the real and perceived value of our offerings but also the need to find new and improved approaches for generating revenue from those offerings.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:13] And part of the attraction of approaches like blended learning, cohort-based learning, microlearning is that they may provide ways to create monetizable add-ons or variations or extensions of the traditional offerings that many learning businesses have, like conferences or seminars. And that can change what and how a learning business is able to charge for those offerings. Microlearning, for example, can make a lot of sense as part of a subscription model or as part of a membership model. And it seems likely that we'll see more offerings going forward where education isn't sold as just that single event or a unit of content but as part of a larger whole, perhaps as part of a subscription package or maybe as part of a complete pathway or a learning journey.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:04] And it's notable that one of the areas we asked about in the survey that just missed being in the top six was around aligning offerings with a specific career or job path relevant to learners. Just under 75 percent of respondents said that they're already doing that, or they plan to start doing that in 2023.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:24] Somewhat related to that, it seems likely that we're going to see more learning businesses that have traditionally sold primarily to individuals evolve into also selling to businesses or finding new ways to distribute their offerings through partners or more advanced technology platforms. The idea being how can you get from that B2C, single units being sold, to having more impact, reaching more learners in a single transaction?

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:54] Right. And we've talked about that before, and we also made the point before that all of this suggests more sophisticated models than the traditional fee-for-registration model. And those are going to require greater business development acumen than many organizations currently have.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:10] Right. And we saw that ASAE relatively recently added business development as a domain to the CAE, the Certified Association Executive credential, that it offers.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:20] Right. Very telling. And I recently attended the annual meeting of Professionals for Association Revenue, or PAR, which is a new organization focused specifically on non-dues revenue for associations. And these are just two signs out of many that we see that

both business development and business models are likely to receive significantly more attention in 2023 and beyond.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:45] So those are our three takeaways: innovation at the edges, blended learning's, rebirth, and business (re)models. Which of those three takeaways resonates the most with you? What takeaway might you add from the data we shared and / or from your own observations of the learning landscape?

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:05] Those are good questions to reflect on after you've finished this episode and good questions to discuss with your team.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:19] So that's our look at the year ahead. At leadinglearning.com/episode338, you'll see options for subscribing to the podcast, and, if you haven't yet, please do subscribe.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:29] Yes, please do, as those subscription numbers give us some visibility into the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:35] 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: [00:23:52] Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one note or conversation with a colleague, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode338, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:08] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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