



Product Development and Learning Communities with James Young

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 339

Jim Young: [00:00:00] So if you take those four words—product development and learning community—what I basically have been focused on almost my entire career is to really say how can we, from the product development part, think about the learning model, think about a business model, think about ways that we can monetize engagement and then link that up with a pure learning community in which it's been designed for people over time to work together, work with peers.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:37] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:38] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:47] Welcome to episode 339, which features a conversation with James Young. Jim is founder and chief learning officer of the Product Community, a product development learning community designed specifically for associations. Jim and Jeff tackle some broad subjects—product development, learning communities, innovation, culture—but they approach these subjects from a practical point of view, drawing on Jim's experience working in a variety of learning businesses that have embraced many approaches and strategies, including credit for prior learning, virtual and augmented reality, gamification, and cohort-based and competency-based learning. If you're looking to spark ideas for product innovation in your learning business or looking to start or enliven a learning community, this conversation is for you. Jeff and Jim spoke in November 2022.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:53] I know you've played roles at associations in the past. You've played roles in academia in the past. Can you just tell us a little bit more about your history as a chief learning officer and in other roles in this learning business world?

Jim Young: [00:02:07] Yeah. Let's see if I can be brief. I'm a trained librarian. I started my career in distance learning about 30 years ago, serving 10,000 students worldwide, teaching them how

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to find information, and basically running a research service. I then built on that foundation, and that's really the core germination of what we'll talk about with the Product Community. I went to George Mason, and I was there for about 10 years, and I was there in the mid '90s, in which there was this flurry of innovation around learning communities. So I was there in a college within a college called New Century College, and it was a competency-based learning community. It was about 10 or 15 years prior to flipped learning, really on the forefront of experiential learning, problem-based, and everything was problem-based in team. Just to give you a flavor, all faculty were required to teach outside of their domain, which just created a deep learning experience, not just for the students, but it created a faculty learning community. It was really just something special, even to this day. I followed one of the deans to a startup university, an anomaly in higher ed, but an anomaly as far as bridging the world of startups with the world of exemplary undergraduate learning and then linking that intimately to industry. So that was a real unique experience. I was the founding chief information officer but oversaw all learning services and the library, and it was just a truly integrative, unique experience that, again, was a building block for me as I shifted over to the world of associations.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:34] And that was Harrisburg University—is that right?

Jim Young: [00:03:36] Yeah, that was Harrisburg University of Science and Technology. They were thriving. It was literally starting from scratch: new curriculum, new budget, new faculty. It was really the perfect opportunity for me at that point in my career. I was full of zeal and ideas and a little bit naive about how the world worked, but absolutely a turning point in my learning journey as a professional but also my learning journey as somebody who's a serial learner but over time has become kind of an SME in the space. So, yeah, those were all interesting experiences, and they really served as a foundation for entering into the world of associations, which I find was ripe and continues to be ripe for some interesting change and evolution. So two associations over about 10 years—one called SCUP, Society for College and University Planning, in Ann Arbor and the other one was the American College of Chest Physicians outside of Chicago in Illinois—and chief learning officer. Basically, they're quite different organizations, but I had the same charge driven by the board, which was to develop an inclusive learning strategy to tap into what was already a healthy community but to really invest deeply in learning as a vehicle for longitudinal engagement. That's what really married those two, really paired those two up as building blocks in my career as I was able to apply what I knew about learning communities from undergraduate learning but then was able to say, "How do we link that to adult learning and create flexible yet innovative learning paths for people who are hungry not just for professional development but hungry about building relationships with their peers?"

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Jeff Cobb: [00:05:20] Am I correct in remembering that the chest physicians did a fair amount with the simulations? Is that accurate?

Jim Young: [00:05:26] I can't take credit for any of that. Our learning model is multifaceted. When I was there, COVID hit, and we have basically an intensive care unit, we have an ICU, in which we do all of our simulation training, and we were on the cutting edge of that and the cutting edge of experiential learning. And then we really pushed the envelope while I was there to further our imprint in gaming. So we've always been in gaming, but what we wanted to do was to evolve our gaming footprint into more high-agency games in which we could actually measure meaningful impact and outcomes in physician learning. And then the third area, the other area related to simulation and gaming, was VR and AR. So virtual reality and augmented reality. So, again, as I talk about the Product Community, I can get into not just how we create these things to draw learners but how we understand how it helps them, one, improve their own skills and, two, why we really exist, which is to move the needle on patient care.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:36] And I hope listeners are truly listening here to some of what you said because it's remarkable. Either you personally and/or the organizations you've been involved in have been doing things that really are on the cutting edge of learning tactics, learning strategies. You said you can't take credit for the simulations, but you're involved with the gaming, with virtual reality, augmented reality. Going back to the George Mason days, learning communities, competency-based, team-based, that's stuff that people are really aspiring to right now, and most haven't really gotten there. And you're doing this more than a decade ago. So, great to have that level of experience coming to this conversation.

Jim Young: [00:07:15] Yeah, sure.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:16] One question I have, and you can tell me if this is an unfair question because I know that continuing education and lifelong learning weren't really your focus in academia, or it doesn't sound like they were, but, still, I'm wondering if you have a perspective on how the academic world seems to be approaching continuing education and lifelong learning right now. Because, to be honest, it seems to be becoming a real cash cow for many universities. It's saving many of them who are having trouble with their degree programs. How they're thinking about it, how they're pursuing this market versus how you've seen associations, those are the two 900-pound gorillas in the whole adult continuing education/lifelong learning market. How do you see them as being different, if at all?

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Jim Young: [00:07:52] I think there's real parallels. They're complements. Actually at George Mason, it wasn't just undergraduate learning. It was also working with adult learners in this really innovative program—I think it was called bachelor's of individualized study. So what it was is we basically gave credit for lifelong learning. This was in the Washington, DC, area, George Mason, so a lot of these people were working professionals and had accumulated, either through the military or through their professional career. And, then over time, what we said is we're going to create an experiential applied program for you, and you can actually create a major and draw from anywhere on that campus. So my experience with continuing ed, even though that's been 15 or 20 years, is still actually relevant today. I do think it's a cash cow because I think it's a market-first learning program. And, if it's designed properly out of the gates and it's not just solely an in-person, semester-based, GPA-based, kind of the traditional constructs of higher ed learning, you actually can reach new markets. It's been proven over time. Now, I haven't been in higher ed in 10 years, so I can't actually point to specific data. But I do see a connection between associations, higher ed, and then also all of the other content that's out there, either open source or through subscription. So there's so many different ways as a professional to sharpen that pencil, sharpen that saw as you move through your career. And I think that you can really dip in and dip out of all of these. Jeff, the phrase that I'm starting to socialize in the world of associations that I think is relevant here, what we said at CHEST is that we want to create the 50-year learner journey.

Jim Young: [00:09:33] People are like, "What? We have needs right now." And I'm like, "We absolutely have needs right now. But what we want to do is we want to create longitudinal engagement. So we need to be thinking about not just the needs of the physician when they start to engage in the association, which is like mid 30s, age 40, but start to think of them when they choose med school and when they go through med school." And so you're creating these connections, and there's some relevance for that youth market. And then you literally are trying to say, "How do you create this indispensable learning environment?" Then it isn't a matter of membership. Membership becomes an outcome because it's something that's so necessary. It puts the traditional model of associations on the back burner, which are still useful, and basically just says, "Who are you? Who do you want to connect with? And then here's some possible learning paths for you to evolve over time." Which to me doesn't have to be just the association. You can tie in with for-profit learning companies and higher ed. And then ultimately you start to think of not just what am I going to learn over 50 years but what problems I'm going to solve with whom, and then how am I going to shape the world. Putting learning at the heart of that, not as something solely credential-based.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:10:44] Right. Right. That jibes so well with we've often talked about, the concept of the other 50 years. Most people are done with their traditional K-12 and higher education sometime in their mid 20s, if they're lucky to even go that far with it. And then they've got this other 50 years in front of them that they have to navigate. And, of course, associations play a role in that. Continuing ed plays a role in that. Any number of other providers play a role in that, as you're saying. And I think for all of those different types of organizations to think about how they fit in, what role they can play, and increasingly I think of associations in particular as being more in the career business than anything else. How are you helping to support that path across a career? I'll note, too, that we've also had Chris Dede on the show. I don't know if you're familiar with his work, but he talks about the 60-year curriculum. So, you know, similar.

Jim Young: [00:11:34] Oh, yeah, I know Chris. I got my doctorate at George Mason, and he was one of my professors.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:39] That would make sense. Yeah. So we'll definitely have to...

Jim Young: [00:11:41] Absolutely. Leading thinker. We could spend the rest of our time on Chris.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:46] We'll be sure to link to that episode as a part of the show notes for this episode as well. So one other thing I want to say. I feel like I wish I had a bell to ring every time you mention one of these concepts that's just so important that you've been involved with. Credit for prior learning is what you were talking about earlier, which, again, sure, so many organizations are looking at now and saying, "How do we do that?" Because adult learners typically have so much experience. They don't need a course per se. They just need some way to establish that they actually learned a great deal already in life and should get some credit for that, where credit is actually applicable.

Jim Young: [00:12:18] Yeah, it's funny, my whole early career was based in that. So, when I was at Embry-Riddle, we were basically working—it's a school for aviation, Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University—and our students were distributed throughout the world. And this is pre when the web went Technicolor. This was in the early '90s, and there were military bases all throughout the world, and they were on ships, and we actually offered degrees. And it was a lot of based on prior learning—I was in the library, but I played as much of a learning function as anybody in that program. So it was this early glimpse into, hey, how can we not bend the model or break the model but really start to evolve what's fundamental and timeless about professional learning and to really hook on to that and then to create some interesting channels

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for engagement on top of that just foundational basis of learning, whether it's "I have a need for a credential" or "I just want to further my career."

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Jeff Cobb: [00:14:18] So you've clearly got a very rich background in the learning world, and now you've brought this to a new project, a new company. You've created the Product Community, which I want to make sure we spend some good time talking about it. So maybe a good point to start from is, well, tell us about Product Community and what problem it was created to solve.

Jim Young: [00:14:39] So the Product Community is a product development learning community designed specifically for associations. So, if you take those four words—product development and learning community—what I basically have been focused on almost my entire career is to really say how can we, from the product development part, think about the learning model, think about a business model, think about ways that we can monetize engagement and then link that up with a pure learning community in which it's been designed for people over time to work together, work with peers. It's a choice-based model so that there's ways that they can get content that's more asynchronous and on-demand. But really it's how do we get in a room and grapple with difficult-to-solve problems, complex, messy problems. So the Product Community itself marries these two worlds, one of community and then one of product development. It exists to solve a couple of key problems in the world of associations. And I think this is true for other folks in the learning industry. One, I think we wrestle against a pretty traditional business model. The way that associations work, I think there's assumptions, cultural and otherwise, that this set of services that we typically offer—so we do events and publications, and we'll offer learning—but in and of itself we're often bound.

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Jim Young: [00:16:08] Second, there's stagnant revenue industry wide in the world of associations, and that's typically driven by joinership. Membership organizations, people just aren't joining as much as they would have in the past. And so I think the value proposition conversation needs to evolve. Third, I think we undersell our value. From the learning perspective—you could put that hat on—you're always wrestling for time or wrestling to integrate your services into the lifeblood of the business, association, fighting to get to the table. So I think that those are the bad things, or that's the problems that we're trying to solve. But there's also good ones. Associations, there's something timeless about them, that people love engagement and connection. So I think there's something to tap there. And so the Product Community itself is how do we understand who our customers are? How do we design really interesting value propositions for them? And then to start to engage them in new ways beyond the traditional.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:06] I suspect that what we were talking about earlier around looking at people as being on a life journey, a pathway, particularly for an association to step back and think of that and then how what they can provide along that pathway in all sorts of different ways, I imagine it's got to be a great catalyst for thinking about products at this point.

Jim Young: [00:17:27] Yeah, that's exactly what it is. Again, it's really easy to say, "Let's spend our time ripping on associations." There's a lot of great things that associations do, and there's a lot of great people who go into associations because they believe in the purpose of them. However, I think that we can, over time, shift from what I would call a hamster wheel of single-use, one-off content and programs into learning that actually does drive that longitudinal engagement amongst a community of peers. My ideal description of a well-humming association is it's an ecosystem of ideas. And that ecosystem of ideas—back to a phrase I used earlier—has this indispensable draw and this indispensable value, that ultimately it's something that you want to give your time to, and you want to pay money because you're going to benefit from it, not just from what you learn but who you meet and what problems you're going to solve. Another thing that I see that's really important in the learning world but also in associations, it's how do we get to that higher-order measurement of outcomes. How do we evolve towards, "Hey, I was satisfied this" or "Hey, I learned this" toward "How do I apply" or "What impact am I making with what I'm learning in this community?" In my last job it was how are we going to demonstrate that learning can move the needle on lung cancer, for instance, or COPD in and of itself? There's a lot of research data in that, but how does the learning function affect that? Last thing I would say, related here is that most associations, like most firms or most higher-ed institutions, they aren't very strategic.

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Jim Young: [00:19:16] And so without this clear direction and sufficient capacity and capability, it's actually hard to build, no less sustain, a culture of innovation. So I think there's a real opportunity here, and that's why the Product Community exists. How do we understand what value we have, and then how do we create these really interesting pathways and get really good at creating this so it's not high-stakes. It's actually part of the culture in how we create this value and connect with our learners.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:43] Right. And I like that focus on a becoming a culture. And also what you mentioned about impact. We often talk about the impact imperative because we feel like, as it's more and more crowded out there with just the range of learning experiences that can claim a potential learner's attention, much less what they'll pay for, if you're not actually showing that it has an impact, it's going to be harder and harder to keep them coming back and doing anything with you or harder to convince employers to allow the time or pay the money for their employees to do those sorts of things.

Jim Young: [00:20:11] Yeah, the Product Community is not a content dump. It's not saying, "Okay, let's create a bunch of videos on how to create products in a particular environment." Associations aren't software companies. We're not in the world of physical products. We sit in the middle. We're informed by those two areas of product development. So, yeah, I completely agree. There's an opportunity here because the actual existing business model, which is based around community engagement, does work. How do we evolve that by using product development to create new value for new customers?

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:51] And so let's say that an organization has bought into this idea of a product development community. So they're willing to form a community. And we might talk a little bit about what the challenge is to getting to that point.

Jim Young: [00:21:01] Sure. Sure.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:02] Not everybody says, "Hey, community, let's do that!" But let's say they have gotten there. Practically speaking, what are the kinds of activities going on in a product development community? What are the mechanics? How do you actually move from, "Hey, here we are as a community" to "We've got these great product ideas that we're going to get out into the market and show their impact"?

Jim Young: [00:21:23] Similar to my description earlier, you'll see historical precedence through my previous roles and experience. This is a competency-based experience. So everyone who

goes through the Product Community, it's a cohort-based program. It's, as best as we can, interdisciplinary. So we're trying to get people from different lenses on the learning enterprise together, and that includes marketing and IT and finance, people from publications, people who produce content but maybe in different environments, gaming, etc. So the second thing, in its purest form as a learning community, coming together to solve problems across boundaries is vital. People will learn in unexpected ways and further the community and, again, while enhancing culture simply because people are going to be tied together. What's unique about the Product Community is that you learn to create products and you actually create products. It's not something that's actually theoretical. It's actually boots on the ground. And, I think we'll get to this later, it's a different model of innovation. It's not the Big Bang model, breakthrough idea of innovation. It's really based off what associations do best, which is to understand who their customers are, tap into their needs, build deeper relationships, empathize with them, and then again start to rethink what I view as a lot of underutilized content and learning. And I think there's such an opportunity there to engage further.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:53] And, just to clarify for the sake of listeners who may be wondering, when you're talking about putting together the Product Community and running this cohort-based approach, is this a cohort within a single institution, like a single association, or do you sometimes have people from different associations participating in a community?

Jim Young: [00:23:11] The first product community was started when I was at the American College of Chest Physicians. And so what I just described is we got together a diverse group of people. We had 120 staff, and the cohort was 12. And so it was really based off somebody coming from the foundation, someone coming from grants, somebody coming from sponsorship, but a big basis in learning and product, but also somebody from finance and IT. And half of them were kind of scratching their heads. We offer the Product Community for individual associations, and then we also offer it in which people can join it from lots of different associations, which is a little bit of a different business model because we're not working on shared problems but different problems that, again, I think are related. But hopefully through that peer learning community, people will actually gain insight. So, if I'm working on a game, and you're working on membership, and I'm working on how do I do e-learning, three questions that you can take through the product Community. The question I want people to think about, which is not alien to our world, is how do I productize my annual meeting? It's new language and a new concept that could be done in the more public cohort, the one in which you come from lots of different associations. Or you can do it within your own association. You can go either way.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:24:34] And I imagine, at least at the beginning, there can be a lot of excitement in a community. People are ready to roll their sleeves up and connect with each other, and there's this driver of we're going to create a product, which can keep people focused. But at least my own experience with communities is that over time it's hard to keep that enthusiasm going. It's hard to keep people engaged. It's hard to keep them sustained. What's your experience with that? And, to the extent that you've found that to be a challenge, what tips might you offer for how to sustain the community over time?

Jim Young: [00:25:03] We think we found a sweet spot. There's a certain what I would call radical components to the Product Community. One, you can engage in daylong workshops, or you can engage in three-month experiences. We have both of those in our product portfolio. But really why we exist is this is a year-long cohort for people to wrestle with how to create products in a community. These are products that you actually learn how to actually get them to market. We can't promise that it's going to bear fruit soon, but, in and of itself, we believe that what we're offering is what we call a repeatable product framework. And that repeatable product framework is something you would take back so that you can actually start to rethink all the value that you create through the lens of product, which, ironically enough, is absolutely member-based. It's customer-based. So it's almost a misnomer to call it the Product Community, but calling it the Member Community isn't actually proper. It's really "What value do we produce? And then how do we create a vehicle, longitudinal vehicle around that value to attract and engage the member or the customer?"

Jim Young: [00:26:03] So, longer, what I recommend is change doesn't happen in a two-day workshop. Change doesn't happen in a quarter. The market is responding to the year-long program, and we meet three to four a month. I think that's one way of sustaining this. Keeping it small initially. The Product Community, the way I describe our ideal customer is frustrated innovator. So people who are in the world, want to see evolution, think that associations can innovate at the highest level but are frustrated at the tired business model, the stagnant revenue. Maybe the volunteer model gets in the way sometimes. We think this year-long program to solve it and then outcomes each quarter. So it's not like you're waiting at the end for something. You actually build outcomes throughout as you're on this journey to learn how to build a roadmap, learn how to prototype, learn how to test something, and then how to scale it and then spin it off. So it's actually a model that borrows from software. But, again, it's community-based.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:07] And you just mentioned the frustrated innovator, and I know innovation is very much at the core of this. It's a word that shows up on your Web site a lot. I'd love to hear

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more of your perspective on that because I think a lot of times the innovation you hear about, breakthrough innovation, or you hear about, from a strategy perspective, Blue Ocean Strategy. But I know in the world of associations, and this is not just true of associations—it's true in so many areas of organizations and business—that, A, culturally, breakthrough innovation can be very tough. But then, B, practically speaking, there may not be huge breakthroughs to be made. It may be more around the edges that you need to figure out the things that are really going to tip things towards what the customer, what the member actually needs. What's your perspective on that? How big are we talking about innovation? How does that innovation happen?

Jim Young: [00:27:54] Great question. I'm so glad you asked this question. Some experience here, some things that I don't think work. One, creating a division or department of innovation. I think it's something that needs to be integrated throughout the lifeblood of the organization. It becomes part of the culture. So innovation in of itself, framing less as "What's the new million-dollar idea?" and more as incremental and evolutionary is also vital here. I think that associations in particular—and, again, this relates to higher ed, and it also relates to other learning organizations—do such great work but find that it's often underutilized or often doesn't have a follow-up. So that single-use one-off is really something that I find happens in almost every association I'm in. It's like the annual conference is over. Wow, that was successful. Hey, we brought in a lot of revenue. Hey, we got new members. See you next year. Yeah, see you another four days next October. So, to me, there's a huge opportunity to say, okay, how do we continue that conversation? And, again, people in associations aren't idiots. They have Webinars and things, but it's really sustaining it in which you have meaningful pathways as a learner in something that's relevant to you but also just jazzes you.

Jim Young: [00:29:10] And, so in and of itself, innovation I think is in some ways about leveraging. It's really about how do we leverage what we do well. Most associations, even if they are \$40 million or \$50 million or \$100 million, still have tight budgets. They still have capacity limitations. They still have pressures from the board. So innovation, in and of itself, needs to be something that's distributed, part of the lifeblood of the organization. And, again, finding vehicles around things like product development, which to me is not high-stakes. It's actually something that's required. It's required because I think we need to be thinking substantially more creatively about who our customers are and what they want and then how to deliver it in a way that's going to meet them. And, when I say it's not high-stakes, some products are going to fail. The trick here is that associations have always been in this world, but they don't view it through the lens of productization, which I think is a breakthrough here. In some ways, it's nothing new. It's just new to the space of associations.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:30:16] Well, Jim, as we've already made clear in earlier parts of this conversation, you've obviously got such a rich background in the world of learning and different types of organizations that engage in this learning business. So it's great to see you focusing your thoughts, your energies now in this direction because it is badly needed. We see this all the time, broadly across associations, broadly across learning businesses, and having a more mature approach to product development I think is going to be essential for thriving and for success going forward. Before we wrap up our conversation, though, I want to talk about you thriving going forward and how you help to ensure that with your own lifelong learning. I'd love to know what are the types of things that you as a learner do that that you value. And, to the extent that it's part of how you go about lifelong learning, I'd love to hear about the role that communities play for you as part of your learning journey.

Jim Young: [00:31:13] Great question. Thank you. Thank you for asking. I belong to, for about ten years now, a really unique boutique—I wouldn't even call them an association—Association of Managers of Innovation. AMI is truly unique. It's small. It's boutique. You're going to recognize in my description, it's similar to the Product Community. So it's a learning community of innovators from all different disciplines, literally all different disciplines—military, clergy, high-end product development, people who are in not-for-profits, people who are in software development, librarians, you name it. But they all have something in common, and it is truly a unique place in which you can...it's a safe space. You can actually be vulnerable in this space because being innovative leap, and I think it's often hard, and this is a space in which people can say, okay, hey, I got your back. Let's see how we might solve this really tricky problem together. I read physical books. I have way too many physical books. Yeah, I read online. I'm connected to my phone like everybody else. But this takes me away and anchors me in an analog world. And so I always have at least one or two books going at the same time. A couple of podcasts that I like. 2Bobs, highly recommend this podcast called 2Bobs. Ditching Hourly, Clever, and Lenny's Podcast, these are new to my world, but I think they're absolutely related to learning but also to becoming innovative.

Celisa Steele: [00:32:50] James Young is founder and CLO of the Product Community. You can find links to the Product Community's Web site and Jim's LinkedIn profile in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode339.

Jeff Cobb: [00:33:05] And we do definitely encourage you to check out the Product Community site. In particular, their Association Design Circle may be of interest to association listeners.

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Celisa Steele: [00:33:14] We'd be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable. Jeff and I would personally appreciate it, and those ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

Jeff Cobb: [00:33:33] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode339, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:33:51] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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