



How and Why to Make a Learning Community

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 347

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] We know that relevance is just fundamental. It's so important for adult learners in general. It's one of those core principles of andragogy that Malcolm Knowles pointed to. And that relevance applies to communities in spades.

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

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:21] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:29] Welcome to episode 347 of the Leading Learning Podcast. This episode focuses on community, specifically learning communities, and we want to talk about both why they're important to learning businesses and how to go about making sure your community enhances and supports learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:48] Now it can be all too easy for learning businesses to focus on more traditional offerings, things that we tend to identify more with learning or with education, things like courses and conferences. But there are at least a couple of issues with that narrow focus. First, there's more competition than ever on the content side. Learners have more choices than ever about where to go to find information, and where to enroll in a course on topic X.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:20] Another issue is that sometimes people don't know what they don't know, so searching for a course on topic X isn't a possibility. But if they can see that your learning business focuses on their field or profession or industry, and they can see that you can connect them with others in that field, profession, or industry, then they can see that you can help them get savvier and smarter, even if they don't yet know what specific topics and skills and knowledge they need.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:51] A third issue, of course, is that people just don't want to take courses all the time. And, in fact, I think probably nobody wakes up in the morning saying, 'Gee, I want to take a course today.' So if you only offer courses and conferences, once they complete those,

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they're probably going to move on if you don't have a way to provide ongoing connection and value. And that's exactly what a learning community can make possible.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:14] So let's dig in and talk about what community is.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:19] It's important to take the time to define community to make sure we're on the same page here. And to define community, we'll start by saying what it isn't. Community isn't simply having members. Community isn't just having discussion forums or listservs. Community isn't having followers on social media. And community isn't having a good e-mail list, even one with a great open rate, and great click rates.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:47] And so, maybe we should talk a little bit about why those things aren't necessarily community. And one reason is that there are often broadcast approaches that are sort of one-way streets, where it's you, as a learning business, sending out your message to the learners, and there's really not a back and forth. Community isn't usually centralized, not even a two-way street. It's really all sorts of one-to-one connections, you know, different learners going to different learners, and it's much more of a network rather than that broadcast and central hub sort of design.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:25] Right. I think there's often even a touch of chaos to a really good community as all those connections are flowing all over the place. And it's tempting to think that you have something like a discussion forum or a listserv. It's set up. It's all nice and structured. You've got the technology in place that could support the community, but that, in and of itself, will not make the community. Of course, it's good to have discussion forums. Of course, you probably need some form of membership to bring people into the community. Of course, e-mail is helpful. All of these can be part of what goes into building a vibrant community, but they, in and of themselves, are not community.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:02] And so, if we just talked about what a community isn't, it isn't just these sorts of tools and having these things in place like an e-mail list or like discussion forums or listservs. But if we want to talk about what community is, I will draw on a definition from Merriam-Webster, where it talks about community being a "unified body of individuals." And then there are a bunch of different sub definitions which all get into, okay, what is it that unifies that body of individuals? It could be a shared geography. So you can think about a community in the sense of a neighborhood, a city, or a town. It could also be a body of individuals unified by an identity. So maybe it's immigrants or third-generation people in a community. It could be that they're unified by an interest. Maybe it's people who love singers and songwriters, and

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they get together around that. Or it could be, of course, around a profession or, even more specifically, around a problem or a challenge.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:06] There definitely has to be that unifying element, that thing that everybody is focused on is what we've referred to before as kind of a social learning object. That object doesn't have to be literally an object. It can be that sense of identity and the topics and things that you're likely to talk about and have interactions about by being part of a community organized around that unifying principle. I think it's important that a community is something much more than transactional. With membership organizations, you often talk about people who are checkbook members, you know, so they're just writing the check every year so they can be on the membership roster. It's just part of what they do, but you can't really say that those people are participating in a community. And if all the people you're bringing together are interacting in that way, that's entirely transactional. You don't really have a community going on. With a real community, people feel it, they know it, and they know they're a part of that community. There's an emotional connection when you're in a community; it's really that sense of fellowship that goes with a community.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:12] And we're really talking today about one specific kind of community. We're talking about learning community. That means that one of the things that unites the individuals in that community is the desire to learn and to help others learn. So if you're going to probably layer some other sort of connection on top of that, but that would be at the core of all learning communities is that desire to learn, help others learn, and make progress yourself.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:38] Let's talk about why learning communities are valuable to learning businesses. That's sort of the premise we're operating on here—is that there's a reason to do this, that there's value to be created, and that value is usually multifaceted. So there are multiple reasons to try to build and grow a vibrant community. Now, one of those is that communities are really hard to replicate. If you've got a strong community with that unifying principle, people feel an emotional attachment to it. It's gone way beyond transactional to really being about relationships in that community. That's very hard for anybody else to replicate. It's very hard for any competitor to replicate. So it's therefore, a potential huge strategic differentiator. If you're out there talking about those traditional ways of providing learning and education, say, courses and conferences and things like that, you've probably got competition on that. There are a lot of people who can go out and stand up an event or put together a course; put those into the marketplace, and you're competing head-to-head on that. That often gets very transactional, but you infuse that community element, which we'll probably talk about some more.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:07:53] Community is not easy to make that happen, to get that unifying principle there, to get people emotionally engaged. If you've got that as the context for your courses and for your events that bring people to those courses and events and give them some place to go after those courses and events, that's a big differentiator. So I think that's reason one we'll talk about in terms of the value that learning communities can create for learning businesses. And, of course, that is value that you're creating for your learners.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:24] A second reason is that learning communities tap into the human desire, actually, probably even the human need for connection and interaction with others. And we've talked in multiple episodes recently, Jeff, about the fact that the COVID-19 pandemic really sort of heightened this desire for social. There's been some pent-up demand for social interactions because, for a time period, it wasn't safe or allowed to gather in person. But then, I was realizing just last night that this idea of having this hunger for social connection has really been around for longer than that. Vivek Murthy has talked about loneliness as an "epidemic" in this country, and that predates COVID-19, certainly. And Robert Putnam's, *Bowling Alone*, I can't remember what year that came out, but again, definitely pre-pandemic. This idea that we're becoming more and more withdrawn, we're doing more on our own, and yet we still have this internal, innate need to connect with others, and so if you can provide a learning community, then that's going to help satisfy this desire that humans have.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:38] Yes, and so right. It's been there for a long time with the rise of technology, the Internet, the Web, and social media. Social media, which is supposed to make us more connected, is one of those things that's often making people feel more isolated. But, of course, this even predates that. There is just a human desire to connect with other human beings and have that strong sense of community. So that would be a second big reason. A third one is that if you're leveraging community effectively, you're really tapping into an effective way to support learning. We talk a lot about learning not being an event. Learning is a process. It happens over time. It requires engagement and reengagement, repeatedly. And if you have a community where people can come in and get the support that they need at the times that they need it, where they're going to be reminded of what their goals were and what they were trying to achieve, where they're going to be able to get answers to questions, that's going to support that learning on an ongoing basis and support learning as a process. And, of course, within the context of a community, you have the ability to put mechanisms in place that help to support accountability.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:51] Sometimes community members will do this for themselves, but that's something you can build into the community. For example, yearly, I participate in a

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songwriting community, February Album Writing Month. The whole idea for the February Album Writing Month is you're supposed to write an album worth of songs during the month of February. It makes a tremendous difference to have thousands of other people in this community who are all hyped up and passionate about it and are issuing challenges to each other and holding people accountable for their challenges. It's a very vibrant atmosphere. You know, by the time you've finished that, you are going to be a better songwriter because you've been challenged, you've been held accountable, and you've been practicing. And that's another aspect of community. It can help so much with applying things to life and work. Because, in that instance, people are hands-on trying to do what they have set out to do, which is write songs, and they're doing it; they're getting feedback from each other; and they're sharing what they're doing. Everything we know about learning says that's a great thing for learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:50] And then, also, as part of that, community is really—this may be the wrong way to put it—sort of the cheap form of personalization. You don't have to have artificial intelligence and algorithms and everything else. You have actual people supporting each other, and you're able to come to that community with your particular needs and say, "This is what I'm trying to achieve," and get feedback from other people and shape yourself and help others shape themselves and grow over time through the interaction that just naturally occurs in human community. So you're getting all of that as part of having an effective community in place.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:30] 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.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:30] A fourth benefit or potential value to a community is just that it can really fit nicely with the demands and realities of modern life and work. Again, COVID definitely ramped up the upheaval, but we've been living in a time of upheaval even before the pandemic, where we are seeing that we're living longer, we're changing jobs more often—not

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just changing jobs more often, we're changing careers more often. And all of that can mean that it's much harder to know what you need to know. And then, even if you can figure out what you need to know, it can still be hard to find very specific content. I remember talking with Jen Lewi for the podcast, and she shared that during COVID, the School Nutrition Association really had to stop what they were doing and really think about how could they best support their members. They went from having members that were feeding kids at physical school locations who, because of the pandemic, still had to feed those kids, but suddenly those schools were closed. There's all the health risks going on with it. They really just kind of had to pivot and listen to their members. They turned to their community and heard from them. You know, what are the challenges they're facing? What are they trying? And they really just sort of shone the light on the community and what each different schools, the different members were doing and sharing that with one another.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:55] And I think this has always been a human need. I think it's one of the upsides of what technology has now made possible, because technology can be isolating in many ways, but in other ways it's making it possible to have these forms of communication, connection, coordination, collaboration, and all of that great stuff that can really help us learn what we need to learn and solve problems. So being able to bring technology into our modern life and work to help us support the role that community can play, which is a big one in the world we live in right now. So that was number four. The fifth one we'll mention, and this is hardly the exhaustive list of community benefits and value, but it's where we'll stop today. And this is market insight—a community can provide a view into what's on the minds of your learners that is hard to get otherwise. Engaging with them in a community, being able to be there and to observe and interact, you're going to be able to answer some of those big questions like: What are they struggling with? What's keeping them up at night? You're going to see that emerge from the types of interactions and conversations that will occur in a community.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:09] Then, of course, you can use that insight to improve, whether it's your existing courses, events, other products, or to create new ones. And, of course, you can use it to help improve the community itself by bringing in new elements of it. When I wrote *Leading the Learning Revolution* a while back, I mentioned that Ned Campbell, who, at the time, was at the Florida Institute of CPAs, basically was just listening in on what was going on their listservs there, and participating and hearing what people were talking about. And the first time it hit him was when he saw this conversation bubble up around what are called comfort letters in the accounting world. I don't even think I'll try to define anymore what comfort letters means. You can you can get the book and read it if you want. But he saw that this was an emerging topic. It was something that was very, very important to the audience. So he went out and created a

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Webinar on it. And I think it was, in this case, a Webinar he actually charged for. I can't remember, but, in any case, he got a huge number of people coming to this Webinar at a time when a lot of people were struggling to get people to come to their Webinars.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:08] And then he started using this again and again, just really tuning in, paying attention to what people were telling him that they needed, even though they weren't directly saying, 'Hey, Ned, make me a Webinar on comfort letters.' He was smart enough to read the tea leaves, so to speak. And it reminds me, you know, Seth Godin, I've quoted him on this before. One of the things he'll say is, "It's harder to find people for your products than products for your people." It's the whole—you don't want to just build it and hope they'll come. It's great if they've come first, and then you hear what they had to say and you build it for them. You're so much more likely to have a winner if you do things that way. So communities can be very, very powerful for market insight.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:50] So that was five reasons that we think it might make sense for you to really consider community and the value that it can add to your learning business. As you said, Jeff, not at all a comprehensive list, but these are just five really high-value points that a learning community could help you achieve. And so, hopefully, you're convinced of the value you're seeing, a potential in at least one of those things that we mentioned. And assuming you do, then, of course, the next piece is—how do you go about building a community?

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:24] Or maybe even remaking a community. We know that lots of learning businesses, especially those embedded in trade and professional associations, have discussion forums already, for example. And so, your organization may be thinking it already has a learning community, but you have to step back and ask, "Do we really?" And even if we do, are we getting anywhere near the level of value out of it that we could, or recreating anywhere near the level of value out of it that we could? As we mentioned earlier, just having members or having listservs and discussion forums, that alone is not going to make a community.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:00] Right. And one of the key characteristics of a true community is intentionality. You, as a learning business, need to be clear internally, and then you need to be clear with those in the community about why this community exists. That is essentially the community's identity. We talked earlier about a community being people bound by something, and so that's what you have to be really crystal clear on. As part of being clear, though, you're going to have to balance being broad enough to appeal to a critical mass and balance that with being specific enough for individuals to really believe that your community offers something

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unique and something of value. And so, your intentionality is going to be reflected in the community's identity.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:48] I think that tension between being broad enough to reach a critical volume of people to participate in a community, but then being specific enough to get them really engaged, that's at the heart of a lot of the challenges that people creating communities face. Oftentimes, you're going to have to, just like you have to with your broader market, really think about the segments within your communities, the sub-communities that you may need to help get to the specificity that's needed within that broader contact. So you might have sub-communities with your community that are specifically for people who are new to the profession or new to whatever you're doing with them. There may be sub-communities that are for people in specific types of leadership roles or those aspiring to leadership roles. A lot of possibilities around this. But the point is you really have to look at: Where is the specificity that's going to drive demand, that's going to pull people deeper into the community? What can you reasonably support? What can you provide value around? And all of this really comes down to relevance. How are you being as relevant as possible for your community members?

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:06] We know that relevance is just fundamental. It's so important for adult learners in general. It's one of those core principles of andragogy that Malcolm Knowles pointed to. And that relevance applies to communities in spades. You have to make sure you're really getting at it. And, you know, that sounds like a no-brainer, but it's often not easy to figure out. Again, this is one of the key challenge areas around communities. It can require a certain amount of trial and error to learn what's truly relevant to your audience, broadly, and then what's going to be relevant, more narrowly, with specific subgroups of your audience to get them more deeply involved and to make it worthwhile for them to participate in a community. The other thing about relevance, too, is that it's not one-and-done. This takes repetition. You have to continually be there, be engaged, and be watching. It takes that exposure for the people in the community to realize that you really have relevant stuff out there because you're continually putting it in front of them. And it takes repetition for you to continually be in the community and see what the relevant areas are that you need to be responding to.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:28] So relevance is really important. Facilitation is another really important aspect of community. You can't just kind of put content out there, you know, sort of build it. They're going to come. And you really have to be highlighting different pieces of content and the value that you're providing in the community. And, on top of that, you also need to be connecting specific people with specific content. Hopefully, you're going to have facilitators who really know something about the people who are in that community and can help point

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them to what they're going to value, what they need that exists in the community. Also, hopefully, you're going to connect individuals with one another. So you might know that Joe is an expert in a particular area and you know that Rashida needs information in that area as well. You want to make sure to connect those two people together. And just as you were saying, Jeff, that this is not one-and-done. Facilitation is not one-and-done. You can't do it once and have it too rote. We're going to post a question every day and just expect that to suffice as facilitation.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:39] It really is going to have to be much more natural and customized and personalized to that community, so that you really are helping people to notice and take advantage of the value that exists in the community and then to add to that value that exists in the community. I think about *The Tipping Point* by Malcolm Gladwell. He talks about different types of people. Connectors are one of those types of people. And this is where you definitely need good connectors in your community, so that they are helping individuals to connect and begin to develop relationships that are deeper than what they had when they entered into the community.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:21] And also keep in mind that the relevant, valuable content that you highlight, a lot of that can come from the community. You can highlight individuals' successes, point out questions they're asking. In general, content about the community is valuable content. I think Richard Millington has said something along those lines in one of our interviews with him. And so true. Human beings like to hear about themselves and the community. So keeping that in mind as you are facilitating.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:51] I think, too, that a role of facilitator should be to reward the behavior that you want. When you get individuals in your community posting and sharing and connecting with others, again, you want to use your spotlight to point out that kind of behavior so that, then, you can hopefully get others in the community to begin acting similarly. That way, you're going to get a much more organic, self-sustaining community over time. Up front, you're probably going to have to do a lot of facilitation, a lot of work to provide a lot of the content. But what you really want to get to is a self-sustaining community where most of the resources to keep it going exist in the community.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:32] So having that self-sustaining community kind of is the holy grail, I guess, of community—to really have people supporting each other and sort of a flywheel type effect. But, of course, everything we're talking about has required quite a bit of work. We've talked about a lot of things you're going to have to do to establish relevance; to facilitate; to keep people connected; to identify those needs in the community. It's also going to generate a

tremendous amount of value if it is successful. So you've got that combination of work and value, and the natural question is around revenue—"Should you be charging for this?" I think the answer probably is, "It depends."

Celisa Steele: [00:26:11] It depends. I think a lot is going to get back to what your mission is as an organization and what your goal is with the learning community itself. There are multiple ways, of course, to charge. You could bake it into something else that you're already offering. In the case of membership organizations, access to the community could be part of what your membership gets you. You could choose to bundle access to the community with some other products. For example, you're going to get this three-month-long course, and with it, you're going to get access to a community of peers. So, baked in with membership, bundled with something like a course purchase or, of course, you could just have a direct pay. You want to be part of this community? It's going to cost you \$9.99 a year or whatever your price point is.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:05] I think that bundling with a course option points out something we haven't talked about. A community doesn't necessarily have to last forever. There can be short-term communities that are powerful, that serve a purpose for a point in time, take advantage of everything around community, but maybe you're not planning on running it for the next 10, 15, or 20 years. It's just going to be for the three, six, 12 months around a course experience—completely valid. Of course, everything we've said about relevance, connection, facilitation, and identity, all of those things still apply if you want that to work.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:39] Of course, the community could be a free offering that might be where you land. In that case, it could be in the same camp as your content marketing. In this case, it's more of a crowdsourced content marketing approach where you're bringing in people. You're going to let anyone into the community who fits whatever criteria you've established. You've identified the identity of the community, and people who go, "Yeah, that's me," you're going to let them be part of it. And then, hopefully, they're going to come to see the value, the expertise that you and others in the community have. And when they need to buy something, when they need education, when they need a conference to attend or a course, they're going to look to you. So you could take that approach, of course.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:25] You can, and you may do that indefinitely, or it may be that you start out free and, eventually, you convert into having a paid community. If you already have a community now and don't charge directly for it, that's something you may want to be thinking about. That can be a difficult transition to make, but I have seen people make it. I'm involved in a community right now where that happened. It started out free, switched to paid, lost a lot of

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the community members at the point that that transition happened, but built back up and is actually, I think, a much better community now because the people who are there, who have paid something to be a part of it, are much more invested in it. Something to have in mind around your community offerings. Of course, we are always big believers in charging appropriately for the value you create. If you are creating a significant amount of value through community, and a good, true community is going to do that, make sure that's showing up somewhere in the stream of revenues for your learning business. So that's our look at community—what one is, the value they can bring to learning businesses and learners, and how you might create or reinvigorate your own community.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:44] At leadinglearning.com/episode347, you'll find show notes, a full transcript, and resources related to community.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:52] You'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast, and, if you haven't yet, please do subscribe.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:58] Yes, please do, as those subscription numbers give us some visibility into the impact of the podcast and our success in using the podcast to create and sustain community.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:09] 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. Celisa and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:24] 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 through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode347, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:41] 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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