



Centering the Learner/ Worker with CAEL's Christine Carpenter

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 349

Christine Carpenter: [00:00:00] Moving from this either/or to a both/and mindset, it's a challenge, but yet it's an opportunity. This can relate to a formal degree program versus the microcredential we talked about, STEM versus soft skills, workplace learning versus classroom learning. It really goes back to understanding that our collective success is ultimately determined by the individual adult learner's success.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:31] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:33] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. Welcome to episode 349, which features a conversation with Christine Carpenter. Christine is senior vice president of engagement at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. Established in 1974, CAEL is a nonprofit membership organization and a leader in the field of adult learning. CAEL was the original developer of the concept of prior learning assessment, or, as they call it today, credit for prior learning. Celisa and Christine's conversation is a feast of buzzwords and acronyms—credit for prior learning (CPL), competency-based education (CBE), microcredentials, on- and off-ramps for employment and education—but all they talk about is grounded in a real and lasting concern for social justice and equitable access to education and lifelong learning. And Christine's point near the end about the need for both/and thinking when focusing on adult learners strikes us as spot-on. Christine and Celisa spoke in December 2022.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:54] Tell us a little bit more about the work that CAEL does and your role there—specifically, what you do to further the mission of CAEL.

Christine Carpenter: [00:02:02] CAEL was really rooted in this social justice movement around improving economic mobility for traditionally underserved learners. And specifically, our goal was to improve the education and career pathways for adult learners. Our goal is that we do this but working with others—others being from organizations—that together could support

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adult learners because we help them navigate the on- and off-ramps of education and employment. As I mentioned, we're a membership organization, which reflects close to 4,000 individual members coming from post-secondary institutions, as well as workforce development organizations and employers who really support our vision. Our vision is that "every adult can navigate lifelong learning and career pathways that fuel social mobility and community prosperity." My role in CAEL—I'm really fortunate.

Christine Carpenter: [00:03:02] I enjoy leading our overarching membership, our professional development, also our communications because we really strive to provide services and benefits that support not just our members but stakeholders and partners that we work with as we all try to build this transformative and equitable culture of lifelong learning, as well as this economic empowerment for all adult learners. I've had many years of experience with CAEL 15, and part of that experience has been working to cultivate strategic relationships that support our bringing together of industry as well as education. Those partnerships are formative to helping develop this idea of how employers, labor, workforce development, organizations, and post-secondary come together and reimagine how education, work-based learning, and employment all fit together to, again, create that lifelong pathway that integrates learning and work. In fact, our tagline is "linking learning and work."

Celisa Steele: [00:04:13] I really appreciate that social justice focus. That's where you got your start, where your passion is as an organization—to really support those adult learners. And when CAEL says adult learners, I think you have something more in mind than just age. Would you talk a little bit about how you define or describe the adult learners that CAEL serves?

Christine Carpenter: [00:04:34] Yes, you're right. Adult learners traditionally have been categorized primarily by 25 years and older, but we believe in maintaining a more inclusive understanding of effectively serving adult learners, and we try to view adult learners as they view themselves. That's very key to how I think we and our members and partners work together—that, primarily, adult learners don't actually identify themselves as a student first. It's long down in the list. First, they're parents; they're veterans; they're workers. And so what we try to do is help broaden that perspective of adult learners in thinking of it as someone who is trying to basically get education to fit in their lifestyle versus the opposite. Education costs time, it costs money; they have to split their resources among all these other responsibilities with work and family. And so what we try to do is recognize that they're there to education that can be recognized as work-relevant competencies, or they can be recognized as completing a very important goal. It's understanding how essential it is in their life. Is it essential to their career

pathway? Is it essential to their professional or personal goal, and come at it as, how can I, as a stakeholder supporting them, recognize them holistically?

Celisa Steele: [00:06:06] Do you find that there are socioeconomic or key demographics beyond age that factor in? And I'm thinking, for example, about first-time college graduates or other factors like that. Does that play into how CAEL thinks about who it's serving?

Christine Carpenter: [00:06:23] Absolutely. Because we know there are a lot of first-time generation college-level learners, I, being one myself, was the first one to go to college in my family and complete. And then you have all these others from an underserved perspective, or you've got ones that are having situations around barriers that have to do with whether it's economic barriers, whether it's constraints around the fact that they haven't been able to utilize or look at financial aid as an opportunity, or they're not sure how to connect to that. There's just a lot that we try to open up our thinking to and help everybody understand that there are possibilities for adult learners in helping them within their education or career pathway. But you have to think of them as an entity that looks at education in the very many possibilities of their responsibilities and not as the top one.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:26] Your focus is on these adult learners, and that's very clear. I think of the mission—that's who you're serving; that's who your focus is on. But you're doing it somewhat indirectly by working with partners—these post-secondary education providers, employers, industry groups, workforce development organizations, and so on. I'm just curious to know how you go about balancing those members that CAEL has who are helping adult learners and then serving the adult learners themselves. Are they ever at odds?

Christine Carpenter: [00:07:57] That's a great question. As far as CAEL's mission of helping diverse stakeholders understand and embrace that alignment, we often refer to this as the intersection of learning and work and how, then, you can see the ecosystem. You can see that if the learner, and, in some cases, you can say learner/worker is at the center, then, how are education providers, employers, industry, and workforce development supporting the adult learner at the center? Because we put that learner/worker at the center of everything we do. And that's why I think it's not so much a balance from an ecosystem perspective of all these different stakeholders. It's more about how we bring those stakeholders to think about them at the center, to create an education and workforce ecosystem that then enables them to thrive in each one of those scenarios. So one example could be if we're working with an employer that really values education, how can we help that employer connect better to the other learning providers within that region or the other post-secondary entities within that region?

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Christine Carpenter: [00:09:13] And then, how can that alignment of what the employer is looking to support align with what the learning provider can provide? Because, then, this is where adult learners definitely spend their lives, they spend their lives at that intersection of learning and work. And so, if all these entities really have a presence, then it's not only this imperative they support them; but it's also this imperative that how you're supporting the broader community, and then that broader community is being supportive of what we call this economic mobility. Because, then, the stakeholder—whether it's employer or post-secondary—is benefiting, as well as, most importantly, that learner / worker in the middle is benefiting. We consider the demographics between the idea that there are fewer high school graduates, that not only should prompt colleges to be more inclusive of recruiting and supporting these different types of adult learners and workers because it has implications for the workforce, it has implications for labor shortages.

Christine Carpenter: [00:10:19] And we know that adult learners are a vital ingredient to the success of not only the educator and the learning provider, but also the employers in how they're going to continue to support the future. Because the pace of change, as we all know, is absolutely accelerating. And that kind of brings me to lifelong learning. If we can get all of those stakeholders around the ecosystem thinking about that lifelong learner, that you may have the opportunity to enhance their particular situation now and later. And so that continual need that employers have or where we're at within the future of workforce is around upskilling and reskilling. I think it's not so much balancing as having all of those stakeholders see their role today and in the future.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:06] I like the clarity that you have around the learners at the center, that it's a very learner-centric view of what's happening and then bringing the other stakeholders to bear and recognizing that central role that the learner plays and how to support it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:24] 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

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Celisa Steele: [00:12:22] I know that CAEL has deep experience with prior learning assessment (PLA); you referred to that. And so I take it now that the more preferred term is credit for prior learning (CPL). So maybe just talk a little bit about what those/that is and how they work.

Christine Carpenter: [00:12:41] Yes, credit for prior learning; we have shortened that to CPL, which is a term for various methods that post-secondary as well as other education and training providers use to evaluate learning that has occurred outside of the traditional academic environment—outside of the classroom. And sometimes, as you mentioned, it's still referred to as prior learning assessment. The reason we talk about credit for prior learning versus PLA, prior learning assessment, is that we want to have it more universal as an understanding for that learner/worker to understand that your previous experience could actually help you get credit for what you know versus the word "assessment," which is more of what you do. It's the process in which you can have the credit, but from the end-user perspective, it's more important for them to see what the meaning actually could be for them. That's just a little insight into the changing of the terminology.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:49] And when did you change that terminology? Do you know, roughly?

Christine Carpenter: [00:13:53] It was last year. And there are a lot of resources that CAEL has to help explain this and provide more information that you can find on our Web site about it, too. But going back to your question, our deep experience in this, and how do they work? it's that credit for prior learning is used to grant college credit, certification, or advanced standing towards furthering someone's education or training. This is really important to the concept of how to support an adult learner. It can be very much a barrier to those that have started in a formal education, a post-secondary situation, came out of it, and to go back into it can be very difficult as an adult. Research has shown that students who actually participate in CPL are more likely to complete college and that they save time and money while earning a degree. We have set up processes and policies and ways that learning providers and post-secondary institutions can embed this within their systems so that they can see and help remove barriers. The more sad truth about this is that only about 10 percent of adult college students participate in CPL. We want to increase that because we have a lot of research that drives completion for all student demographics, whether that's lower-income adult, Black adult students, or community college students. And so we want to help bring more structure and framework to CPL because we

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know there's a reason to have it support the adult learners with increasing their opportunity for completion.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:53] That's a powerful reason to support it, just if it helps them get to that degree or whatever mark of having an educational credential there. I'm curious to hear you talk a little bit about the role between CPL, that credit for prior learning, and competency-based education, which I know is also something that CAEL talks a lot about, and how those potentially work together.

Christine Carpenter: [00:16:18] Absolutely. I think this first indicates that they do complement each other. And competency-based education, I'll just claim it as CBE and then CPL. They absolutely complement each other, but they're very distinct as well. I'd say both approaches prioritize positive learning outcomes over seat time and can save students time and money that I've mentioned earlier. And with CPL, we value students experiences by awarding credit for such experiences that demonstrate adequate to college-level learning. CBE focuses on student learning and the application of that learning—what they know and what they can do. A key component of CBE is understanding what the learner already knows in order to provide most of the valuable skills and create a personal path to that credential. I'd say CBE also focuses on prior learning, allowing students to parlay it into that personalized path as a credential, so that both practices can serve as a complement to each other. When I think about CPL, it's absolutely embedded in this trusted methodology of how you translate knowledge and skills.

Christine Carpenter: [00:17:38] And so that has come from outside of the classroom into different competencies or skills or even traditional credit hours. I think about the combination of recognizing what someone already knows and can do along with a more flexible, personalized learning journey that allows these learners to gain, I'd say, value immediately and then progress towards a credential. I think about that combination, which increases completion. It can also increase employability rates because they can meet certain skill sets required for certain employers, which are really both critical to that, going back to that individual mobility and the health of our economy.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:23] Well, I'm glad that you brought up personalization, and I do think that's interesting to think about how that credit for prior learning is a way of personalizing, then, what they'll subsequently study or focus on as they learn and engage with courses and other forms of learning. I think you've already spoken to this somewhat, but I want to ask just a little bit more. I think that CPL kind of ties to diversity, equity, and inclusion because of that saving of the time and money. And when you save that time and money, then it broadens the

potential for who can participate in a particular experience. What else would you say, or what might you add to that relationship between DEI and CPL?

Christine Carpenter: [00:19:07] That's a great question. I touched on some of that earlier around the DEI implications, but one big opportunity in front of us is increasing the CPL usage among underserved students. For example, I'd say the Adult Pell Grant recipients, which we know is a proxy for lower-income students. In one of our research studies, they've demonstrated greater than average completion boosts from utilizing PLA/CPL programs, particularly Black Adult Pell recipients. Unfortunately, Black and lower-income adult students were least likely to receive CPL credit. This is potential opportunity that's really finding ways to create more CPL opportunities outside of this white-collar work experience. We have the research. We know that we can use this in a DEI role to lift barriers for lower-income students. We collectively have to do a better job of providing this upfront as an opportunity.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:21] I was thinking microcredentials—and I know that's another area where you have expertise and experience, but it seems like those two can play a role in diversity, equity, and inclusion; this idea of making it smaller and more manageable, which therefore, might make it something that more people could undertake. But what would you say about microcredentialing in its role in just supporting adult learners, and potentially, if you want to speak to the DEI aspect as well?

Christine Carpenter: [00:20:47] Sure. I think microcredentialing is a great opportunity to tip your toe in the water. When you're an adult learner, maybe you don't have a good memory of your first experience in college, so you want to think, 'Well, if I can commit to a full degree...' So being able to show yourself that you can complete steps in 'the process of' is great because we know that adult learners have growing concerns about the value of education. And most of that comes with concerns of not only the cost of a traditional degree program but also the misalignment, that previous opportunity that you had in education, had with workforce. And so, given that uncertainty, it's not surprising that adult learners favor flexibility and multiple access points. And stackable credentials offer solutions in several ways: they can be aligned with the employer needs; they don't lock learners into this linear all-or-nothing trajectory; learners can complete courses; they can earn a digital badge that really indicates their mastery of the specific skill.

Christine Carpenter: [00:22:00] We've done work with employers who have embedded certain competencies and skills into the definition of the badge so they can actually see what that learner is bringing to the table. They might focus on earning a certificate that then can help them

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finish their bachelor's degree because it's a stepping stone. It's the stackable credential. Really, the whole point around microcredentialing with the way that it works towards stackable credentials, paves the way forward. It gives adult learners/workers this educational on- and off-ramp that the learner really needs. Life gets in the way, and so, if I can master a small skill, a small competency at a time, then that microcredential can lead into all kinds of education opportunities that help in the way that adult learners are more likely to be employed today. I know there was a study by Brookings Institute that found stackable credentials were associated with a seven percent wage premium. It tells us more and more employers will look for opportunities that microcredentials can showcase a skill set because sometimes the degree doesn't always tell you the skill set.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:22] I especially appreciated the point about the confidence that a microcredential can give learners and that it can be sort of that toe in the water and building good experiences with education, which then might lead to further education. I'm wondering about our listeners, learning businesses, and if they're looking to better support adult learners, this kind of work that CAEL is doing. What would you recommend that they do as a first step or a second step to really support those adult learners?

Christine Carpenter: [00:24:05] I'm really excited to talk about some research we just completed that we call the framework for creating Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Success [Adult Learner Leaders for Institutional Effectiveness], in short, ALLIES, our acronym. And our findings, they're available at cael.org for free, so you can have your listeners go check this out. But there are five primary themes that were inherent in maintaining a learning environment in which adult learners can flourish. One is affordability. We've talked a little bit about the idea that adult learners are really cost-conscious. A lot of this has to do with how expensive some particular education is and the factors that go into making a decision for the adult learner of where their dollar will most benefit their need. So affordability is big. Career connections and relevance talked a lot about the fact that there are adult learners and workers that are looking for professional growth and development, which is really the primary motivator for enrollment. But, also, does it connect to my career, whether that's today or tomorrow? The other, I'd say, primary thing that came out was academic empowerment.

Christine Carpenter: [00:25:22] Adult learners need to seek, and they want institutions that recognize their complete experience and provide an opportunity for them to manage their own progress and development. It's very difficult for somebody that's managing all these responsibilities to say, "I'm going to be in seat time at a specific time, at a specific part of the day," when life doesn't work that way. They want to be empowered to drive their own

progress. Student support looks different for adults, so it's a critical opportunity for the learning providers to think about what is the adult learner's journey at the front end, and what is it that they want to accomplish at the end of their journey? What support mechanisms are required during that time frame? And then we talked a little bit about DEI. Adult learners embody multiple roles, identities in their lives; institutional systems and structures may perpetuate this inequity in access and student success. Stepping back and really thinking about that adult learner in the absolute situation they're in today, and how does that particular institutional system get in the way of that? How can you support them in completing some of their goals from a larger DEI perspective?

Celisa Steele: [00:26:47] I did take a look at that ALLIES framework, so I think that's a great resource, and we will make sure to link to it in the show notes so that listeners can check it out as well. So when you look out to the future, when you're thinking about CAEL's work, what major opportunities and what major challenges do you see on the horizon?

Christine Carpenter: [00:27:07] I think moving from this either/or to a both/and mindset, it's a challenge, but yet it's an opportunity. This can relate to a formal degree program versus the microcredential we talked about, STEM versus soft skills, workplace learning versus classroom learning. It really goes back to understanding that our collective success is ultimately determined by the individual adult learner's success. So flipping that, there are also huge opportunities for the industry sectors to engage more closely with post-secondary education providers and create, I'd say, credentials that we know today's adult learners need and desire, and employers absolutely need. There's this growing need for training in a format that's attractive to learners because of the likelihood of a future career payoff, one that's flexible enough to let them complete their programs of study while balancing other life responsibilities, as well as, how is it delivered? If we think about the next generation coming through, they're going to be cognizant of what methodology they learn best from.

Christine Carpenter: [00:28:23] And it could be that everybody, instead of getting a textbook, they get the Google Glasses, and all of their content is on that. It's something that we really need to think about as where that's a challenge today, but it's an opportunity that fits a lot of the things that we're saying can be barriers. I feel like we're honored to work at these crossroads where all these stakeholders intersect so that we can continue to support some of the today challenges to tomorrow's opportunities.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:56] I think that both/and observation particularly resonates with me. I do think that there is -- At all ends of the spectrum and then all along the way, just really thinking

about the different options and how, even something like what you're saying, microcredentials all the way to the full-blown degree, those both could make sense, and it's not necessarily choosing one over the other. It's about where does one make more sense than the other, and for whom does it make more sense? This is a question we like to ask folks who come on the Leading Learning Podcast. Since we're talking about lifelong learning and all of that, we love to know about the habits, practices, and sources that our guests use. So when you are looking to continue to grow professionally and personally, what are some of your habits, sources, and practices for doing that?

Christine Carpenter: [00:29:45] That's great. Well, one reason I really enjoy my work at CAEL is that our organization has always had that philosophy that lifelong learning is important. It doesn't end at the completion of one's formal education. It's at the core of what we do. It's part of our DNA. As far as my opportunities for habits, practices, and sources, I come at it with that frame—that I'm a lifelong learner. Whether I'm learning at the workplace, whether I take a professional development course, whether I go back and finish a degree or add a new degree, it's recognizing that I have a natural drive to explore, learn and grow, and learn. I have that because I want to improve my knowledge, but I also want to improve my quality of life, my sense of self-worth. And this idea, that is where most adult learners are coming from. And so, if I can continue to remember the why behind the habit or the practice, I think that always helps me in my work, and it helps me be inspired by the work that we're doing. I mentioned earlier that I was a first-generation college graduate. I completed my formal education as an adult, so I know how important it is to have what you're learning deeply aligned with your career.

Christine Carpenter: [00:31:10] But I also know how important it is to have it deeply aligned with your personal growth and your personal goals. What I think is challenging a little bit is that our world is changing so rapidly. This idea of—you have to consistently be upskilling in order to keep up with the latest knowledge. I think about the adoption of AI. I think about what it means for some of these workers out there to continually have to be adaptable, continually have new and improved skills. It's a constant demand. And so I feel as though having the opportunity to remember not only that having practices of going to the sources that you trust, that you want to learn from is really important, but I think what's more important is keeping a pulse on the why; paying attention to, what are the reskilling and upskilling needs in the country, and how can I be a part of supporting that in a larger way? is really important to me. I go to not only trusted post-secondary institutions that have a lot of great, I'd say, microcredentials or they have a lot of great professional development type courses.

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Christine Carpenter: [00:32:25] I also love to just pay attention to thought leaders out there, and because of CAEL having the ecosystem of so many subject matter expertise in this particular topic, we've got post-secondary institutions, workforce development, and employers that are at the forefront of this. They value education. They're putting resources into, how can they do a better job of valuing education within their entities, within their organizations? I love to follow and read from those experts out there that are doing this work and sharing the work because sharing best practices and what's working in different case studies are helpful to all of us, helpful for all of us who are trying to do this work to learn from each other. I don't know if I've answered anything specifically. I go to XX.com, but it's more of the holistic viewpoint of why I value being able to learn and try to influence others with the same value.

Celisa Steele: [00:33:34] I did ask the question about what, but I think to your point, in this world where there are just so many resources and so much to keep up with, there are so many whats. You could go to so many sources, so many practices you could make part of your daily life. But I think remembering the why and elevating it up to that why probably helps then filter out of all those choices which ones really do make the most sense, which sources are going to be useful. So thank you for that, and...

Christine Carpenter: [00:34:02] Absolutely.

Celisa Steele: [00:34:03] ... for elevating the question from what to why. I appreciate that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:34:12] Christine Carpenter is senior vice president of engagement at the Council for Adult and Experiential Learning. You'll find links to the CAEL Web site and its free newsletter in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode349.

Celisa Steele: [00:34:28] We encourage you to check out CAEL's site, as they have a variety of resources relevant to learning businesses, including that newsletter that Jeff just mentioned and the ALLIES framework that Christine mentioned when I spoke with her.

Jeff Cobb: [00:34:41] If you enjoy the podcast, we'd be grateful if you'd rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. Celisa and I would personally appreciate it, it doesn't take much time, and those ratings help others find the show. So just go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

Celisa Steele: [00:34:59] 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

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Jeff Cobb: [00:35:16] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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

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