



## A Guide to the Informal Learning Business Curriculum

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 356

**Celisa Steele:** [00:00:00] Get serious—or continue to be serious—about your own learning and development. As a learning business professional, you really owe it to yourself and to those you serve to make sure that you are growing and improving.

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

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:00:20] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. As anyone who's followed us for a while knows, we believe deeply in the power of learning to transform individuals, organizations, and communities. That's why we focus the Leading Learning Podcast on serving learning businesses and learning business professionals that create and support adult lifelong learning, continuing education, and professional development.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:00:50] And learning business professionals need to invest in their own learning and development so that they can grow and help the learning businesses they serve improve their reach, revenue, and impact. So, in this episode of the Leading Learning Podcast, number 356 for those of you keeping score at home, we want to highlight one way that learning business professionals can invest in their own learning and development.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:01:17] Specifically, we want to call your attention to a resource we've had up on the Leading Learning site for quite a while now that we call the "informal learning business curriculum."

**Celisa Steele:** [00:01:29] Informal learning is a huge part of how most adults grow and improve, and this resource that we're calling the informal learning business curriculum is simply a Web page, and that Web page curates and collects a number of podcast episodes. But we haven't devoted a podcast episode to the informal learning business curriculum—that is, until today.

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**Jeff Cobb:** [00:01:52] Not until today, but that is what we are going to do today. I'm wondering if we should be referring to it as the ILBC or something.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:01:59] It did seem to beg for an acronym. It's long and unwieldy.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:02:03] We'll see how it plays out in the audience. If you're in favor of an acronym, by all means, go with ILBC, or give us another clever name for it. But, for right now, we're going to stick with the informal learning business curriculum, and we're going to take a look at that with a high-level approach of why, what, and how.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:02:28] Let's start with why. A sense of identity can really help with a learner having clarity around why it's important to learn something. One thing that we've given airtime to quite a bit on the podcast, and we've also given a lot of ink or printer toner to it, is this concept of—

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:02:50] Pixels, I think.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:02:52] Pixels also. But we've devoted a lot of energy to this idea of learning businesses and the third sector of education. Those are two terms that, essentially, we coined, and we coined them because we felt like there was a need to create a sense of shared identity.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:03:10] There really is because it's a sector, it's a business, and it's people within the business who are doing really important work. We think, historically, they often haven't thought of themselves as being part of a community, as a well-defined group of people who are engaged in this whole business of adult lifelong learning, continuing education, and professional development. That term, "learning business," we're obviously not the first people to say "the learning business," but we have a specific way in which we're using it, which is that you're not internal corporate L&D. You're not an academic degree program. You're really in the business of serving those adult lifelong learners who are participating in continuing education and professional development. So you care deeply about learning and creating impactful learning experiences, but you're also doing that as a business. You have to generate revenue and be sustainable in doing it. In doing that, you are playing a critical role in what we have talked about as this third sector of education.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:04:15] And just to go back to the business side of learning businesses for a minute, that means that you have to typically make the case to learners: "Come learn this with us." And so, for us, we have spent a lot of time in the association sector. There is a shared

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identity among associations, and they very often do have a learning business. It's very much tied to their mission in many cases. For us, learning businesses expand beyond associations. It can also be continuing education units that might be housed within an academic institution. But, again, they aren't granting degrees per se. It could be for-profit training companies, but, basically, it's any type of organization that really is committed to helping people in a field, profession, or industry grow and learn. And they're doing that by making the case to them to come learn with us and therefore generating revenue to further that mission. Come back and learn with us some more. We're going to support moving the needle and improving whatever field, industry, or profession we are targeting.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:05:21] If you share our view that this is a defined group and this is a community that does have an identity, it makes sense that there would be learning, education, training, and things to know that people in this community really need to be focused on and continue to improve upon over time. That's really the basis for having this idea of a learning business curriculum. This is content. It's information. It's knowledge. It's experiences that are intended for this group in the learning business, these people who are serving the third sector. We think it's important to embrace that identity and then pursue the education and the learning that goes with that identity.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:06:04] For a quick recap in terms of what we mean by the "third sector," for folks who don't recall or who might be hearing the term for the first time if you're a newer listener, we consider the first sector of education to really be that K-12, well-established education system that serves our youngest learners. And then we have higher education. We have a number, but it's not a majority that go on from that first sector, the K-12, into higher ed, the second sector. But then there's this third sector, which is huge. It's how we continue to grow and learn after we've completed whatever formal education we're going to. So it's a huge sector that we are a part of and that learning businesses are a part of.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:06:50] And it tends to be hidden in plain sight. I think it's enormous but underappreciated. And, again, the work that we do as learning businesses and learning business professionals really is the foundation of that sector, which brings us back again to this idea that we need to learn how to do that well. You can't currently go to a higher education institution and get a degree in the learning business. At this point, what we're offering—what may be the best game in town—is the informal learning business curriculum.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:07:21] Once you have a sense of identity, if you can understand that you are a part of this third sector and that you are one of the other types of learning businesses that are

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serving adult lifelong learners, that can be really important. It just reminds me of Dan Pink, and some of his recent writing is getting at the difference between identifying as a kind of person versus someone who does something. And so he talks about the difference between being someone who runs and being a runner, the difference between playing a guitar and being a musician, or writing and being a writer. The idea being, the more closely you identify with that noun, it feels a little bit closer to who you are. It feels a little bit more core, a little bit more central. We're hoping that you'll embrace that label of learning business professional and that you will identify with this importance and this belief in this importance of what lifelong learning really means for individuals and for society at large.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:08:24] Yes, it's going to help you in your own work. It's going to help you identify with peers within your organization and at other organizations. It's going to help you find resources and recognize the resources that are for you. So why the learning business curriculum? Why engage in the learning business curriculum? Because you are a learning business professional in the learning business, and this is content, this is material that can help you excel at that.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:08:54] We do encourage you to learn with others. Identify as a learning business professional—we hope you will—but then also recognizing that puts you in a group. We all know the importance of social learning and peer learning. There can be accountability there. There can be the opportunity for bouncing ideas off one another and getting feedback. We know how important feedback is for learning. So we encourage you to embrace this identity and then to also seek out others who have a similar identity.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:09:23] Then gather together around the learning business curriculum.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:09:31] We're grateful to Thinkific for sponsoring the Leading Learning Podcast. At Leading Learning, we believe reach, revenue, and impact are essential for all learning businesses. Thinkific Plus is a new-generation platform purpose-built to help growing businesses scale revenue. With Thinkific Plus, you can generate monthly recurring revenue through course subscriptions and membership programs, sell multiple seats for your learning products to a single buyer, suggest additional products in the learning flow to increase sales, and go global with 0 percent transaction fees and payments accepted in over 100 countries. Coastal Drone Co. uses Thinkific Plus to sell online courses, memberships, and certifications to those looking to fly drones in Canada. Since converting its training materials into online courses on Thinkific Plus, Coastal Drone Co. has scaled its business, earning more income, training more people, and positioning itself as a leading educator in the Canadian drone industry. Right

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**Celisa Steele:** [00:10:47] We've touched on why to learn. The next big area we want to talk about is what to learn, and getting clarity about what to learn really is a necessary precursor to effective learning. Of course, that can sometimes be a bit of a "gotcha." If you're really new to a field, even knowing what you need to know can be hard to figure out because you're just such a novice that you don't really understand what the choices are. And so we have a resource that we have put together that we think helps folks who are new to learning businesses, it also helps folks who have been in learning businesses for a while, and this is the Learning Business Maturity Model.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:11:31] That's right. If you're going to have a curriculum, you have to have something that's going to structure that curriculum. You have to have a way of defining that body of knowledge that is going to be the right one for this group that we've identified, the learning business professionals. The Learning Business Maturity Model enabled us to do that. We didn't create it specifically to create a curriculum; the curriculum flowed out of it naturally once we had identified those knowledge areas that we were seeing as so important in the learning businesses that we've worked with for years and years. That naturally prompted us to think, "Okay, well, what's important in the area of each of these domains?" The domains are leadership, strategy, marketing, capacity, and portfolio.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:12:19] If you go to the Leading Learning site, [leadinglearning.com](https://leadinglearning.com), and if you go to the podcast area, you'll see that we actually, more or less, align all of our episodes with those domains. We use those as the categories on the Leading Learning Web site, with a little bit of finesse there. We've added trends just because sometimes things are breaking news—something like ChatGPT, for example—and we feel like that's the best way to categorize those. For those of you who are extra attentive on the Web site, we use the word *learning* rather than *portfolio*. Just thinking for folks who may not be as familiar with the Learning Business Maturity Model, that might be more immediately understandable than portfolio as a navigation item.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:13:09] We have to have some flexibility in these and be willing to shape and evolve them over time. Naturally, anybody who's showing up on the Leading Learning Web site for the first time, particularly if they've never heard this concept of the learning business, if they've never thought of themselves as a learning business professional or thought about the third sector or anything else, then we want the terminology to be as understandable as possible. A word like *portfolio* may not immediately jump out to somebody as "Oh, I know what they

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mean by *portfolio*,” and we’re really talking about the learning experiences. What are those experiences in your portfolio as a learning business? This is essentially a taxonomy of sorts, a high-level taxonomy. That’s always tricky territory, but important to be able to name things and have a common language and a common point of reference around the important areas of knowledge and activity within your organization, within whatever field or industry you’re serving. In fact, we have an interview coming up with Stephanie Lemieux of Dovecot. We’re going to talk about taxonomy in some depth because it is very important, and, with the Learning Business Maturity Model, we took a high-level pass at a taxonomy, and then this curriculum we’re talking about flows out of that taxonomy.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:14:25] The maturity model offers these five domains, which get you thinking, “Okay, what is it that I need to know about leadership? What is it that I need to know about strategy? What is it that I need to know about marketing? What do I need to know about capacity and portfolio?” The other thing that the maturity model does is begin to give you a sense of a trajectory. At the most basic level, anytime we set out to learn, it’s about improving; it’s about getting better. But, if you can be a little bit more specific about that, that can be even more helpful. In terms of the Learning Business Maturity Model, it’s about moving from stage one (static) to stage four (innovative), and, obviously, two other stages along the way there. And that helps you begin to chart what it looks like to get better and having at least a rough idea of what are some of the goals and milestones along this way to improving and getting better. I know our son, for example, is a runner, and, as a very clear goal, he wants a sub-five mile. Having that clarity allows you to know, “Okay, what is it that I need to do in terms of training? What is it that I need to work towards in terms of performance?” The more clarity you can have, the easier it becomes to figure out what the what is when it comes to learning and improving as a learning business professional.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:15:48] The Learning Business Maturity Model does have an assessment to go along with it, so you can assess and see where your organization is in the different domains and what stage you’re at. That’s going to give you information about where you do need to be investing some time and effort to learn and change. And you can use that as a map for how to dive into the curriculum. If you see that we need to develop more or I need to develop more (depending on how you’re using it) in the area of strategy or in the area of marketing, you’re going to be able to see that there are specific episodes or specific resources in the curriculum that relate to different areas of marketing, and you can home in on those and say, “That’s where I’m going to focus right now.” This isn’t something you have to go through in a lockstep fashion. In fact, we encourage you to really use it where you have the most need in your organization, as a catalyst for your own reflection, for your own discussion, for setting those

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goals that you just referred to, those milestones, and use the material that we're providing here as one of the tools that's going to help get you to those milestones.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:16:51] And, as big a fan as we are of having some clarity around what it is you want to study and what it is you want to learn, we do believe in the value of that. That's what we're talking about here with the Learning Business Maturity Model. But I do also want to put in a plug for allowing some time for serendipity and free exploration and not always feeling like, if you're going to sit down to read, it has to very clearly be something that's going to help you get to that next stage of maturity in strategy, for example. We're both liberal arts majors, so I definitely am a big fan of this idea of intersection, and whatever you're doing in one area may—or may not—have bearing on another area in the end. But I think allowing some time for exploring what you want to explore and going where your interest leads you can also be fruitful.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:17:44] Definitely. And we take the informal part of the informal learning business curriculum seriously. You can, of course, put as much structure as you want on this and make it lockstep and milestone-driven. But also, as you're saying, Celisa, just allowing for some space around it. You might one day show up on the Leading Learning site and read an article. It might be a month or two before you come back, but, in the meantime, maybe that sparked some exploration in different areas for you, some conversations, and led to some of that serendipity that you're talking about, which is often some of the most important stuff when it comes to our ongoing growth and development.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:18:29] We've talked about why, we've talked about what, and that brings us to how. The how in our minds ties to learning science and what we know about effective learning practices and learning approaches.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:18:45] One big one, of course, is time—and having regular times but also over time, so repeated exposure to the content, material, the knowledge that really make up the body of knowledge, the competencies around being a learning business professional. Something like this curriculum is a great practice, I think, to put some time on your own calendar, maybe once a week, maybe once a month. We would certainly advocate more than once a month. Once a week sounds good. It doesn't have to be much. Maybe you put 15 or 30 minutes on your calendar to say, "I'm going to go and familiarize myself with this particular episode." You might listen to the episode. You might read the show notes. You might scan it. You might get some of the major ideas from it and reflect on it, but have time on your calendar that you're going to do that on a regular basis. And you can do that for yourself. We also recommend doing

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that with a group within your organization because the episodes that we highlight as part of the curriculum can be a great basis for conversation. Have everybody listen to them, and then come together as a group, whether that's the team within your learning business or whether you're in a bigger organization that has other parts of the organization that you want to familiarize with some of the concepts, the main ideas, the main knowledge. You might bring in your CEO, your head of IT, or your head of marketing if that's the type of organization you're in, and have some conversation around some of these specific materials within the curriculum.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:20:20] Basically, this means learning is not going to happen if you do not make time for learning to happen. And so we do advocate making sure that you're carving out time and carving it out regularly. This ties to the idea of spaced learning. We know that we need to revisit content. We need to continue to come back to ideas and then elaborate. That's how you get more fluent in whatever skill or knowledge you're talking about over time. We've talked about time. Another thing that we would advocate is making sure that you are allowing for both strategic learning and more tactical learning. What I mean by that is, strategic is more of "Okay, I need to get familiar with a concept." I guess, not to get too meta here, but thinking about strategy could be a strategic thing that you're doing. That's a big, meaty concept—strategy. But you still need to dig into it. You shouldn't be afraid of it, even though it's big and meaty, and we have some tools that can help you do that. For example, we have an episode on the Product Value Profile, and that begins to get that strategy down to a tactical level. That's what we're advocating of—both taking a big-picture view of big concepts and embracing those but also digging in some and getting very tactical and specific. What is it that you can do with a particular idea or a particular piece of knowledge?

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:21:44] I can think specifically—and this is on the page for the curriculum right now. One of the things we start with is the series that we did, I believe, back in 2020-21, which was around big topics and big shifts that were happening in the learning business and in the world as it impacted the learning business. A lot of higher-level conceptual conversation could be had around those that you then have to work into specific actions you're going to take as an organization. On the other hand, right after that, we list our Tool Talk episodes, which are very concretely about things like the Product Value Profile, the Value Ramp, or the Market Insight Matrix—specific tools that you can apply in specific ways within your organization. We definitely span that more strategic/conceptual and the more tactical/practical action levels with the content that we cover.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:22:37] So far, in talking about how, we've talked about time and then about this balance of strategic and tactical approaches. Next we want to talk about the social and

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collaborative side of learning. Materials can be really helpful for individual learning, but it can be even more rich and valuable if you're able to bring in multiple and diverse perspectives on those resources so that you're getting not just what it is that you think about a particular idea or piece of information, but you're also hearing from your team, from your colleagues, from those in your organization and those outside your organization.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:23:19] We already alluded to this a little bit in the time section, talking about scheduling time not just for yourself, but also potentially for a team or a group, even if you don't do that on a regular basis. Having some level of interaction around these materials is just really helpful. We do often hear from organizations that are making use of the materials in those team- or group-type conversations. I talked to a person from a trade association recently that had done this with the leadership in the organization, not just in the learning part of the organization, but, I believe, the CEO and the head of marketing—it's that type of organization; they've got those people—were all involved. It was all the leadership team for the organization, and they were talking about our five Cs episode that we did not too long ago, and that was just a good catalyst for conversation, both about what was in that episode, but then it automatically draws you to what's going on in your organization, your situation, and can help to surface issues that it would be harder to get surfaced otherwise. It can be really effective for that. We just know that social interaction is so helpful around learning anything. Even if you're not doing these sorts of group discussions, sharing your thoughts on an episode on social media and getting some feedback and some interplay around that, that's another form of using social around learning. So think about the ways that you can take what you get from any of the curriculum materials and get it out there in the world and get some feedback and some interaction around it.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:24:48] We've talked about time. We've talked about balancing strategic and tactical. We've talked about social and collaborative opportunities. We would also urge you to think about application, to make sure that you are doing something with what you're learning. That might take the shape of creating a project so that you can get practical and hands-on with something that you're learning. The Tool Talks that we've already mentioned, I think, lend themselves to this very easily. You have these tools, and they are meant to be used. So don't just listen about that tool; you want to actually go and make use of that tool. That's how you're going to begin to get the most value out of it.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:25:30] We try to provide these kinds of opportunities in the podcast episodes as well. The Tool Talks, obviously, are very focused on those sorts of opportunities, but we'll often call out areas where you should ask yourself a question or reflect on an action item out of what

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we're talking about. I just interviewed, for example, Susie Wise recently, and we were talking about belonging and community, and she's got a great book that has exercises all throughout the book. We talk about some of those exercises and specific calls to action in there to pause. So actually do these exercises as part of your personal work or within your organization. Podcasts don't get thought about enough, I think, as media for learning. But they can be so great in terms of the knowledge and the content you can get from them, but they can also spark action. And we certainly try to do that with the Leading Learning Podcast.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:26:22] And then, tied to this application and doing something with what you're learning is feedback. We, again, know that feedback is really essential to learning. If you're going to try out a tool or if you're going to reflect on a key question, we invite you to also make sure that you're getting some feedback on it. Again, this could be with the peers internal to your organization or external to your organization. It could go back to your idea of sharing on social media, Jeff. If we see something out there on social media, we'll respond.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:26:58] We've now covered why to engage with something like the learning business curriculum—I should say the informal learning business curriculum.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:27:08] ILBC.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:27:09] ILBC. Ill-bick. With the ill-bick. It's because we all are part of this thing called the learning business. We all are learning business professionals serving this third sector of education, and there are specific areas of knowledge that we need to continue to develop in and progress towards mastery of, over time. So that's the why. We've covered the what of the learning business curriculum, really drawing on our Learning Business Maturity Model as an underlying structure. But, of course, you can use that as a jumping-off point and go from there to add what's meaningful in the context of your own learning business. And now we've looked at the how to do that—making the time, repeating over time, being both strategic and tactical with the materials, engaging with others around it, making sure that you're focusing on actually applying what you're hearing or what you're reading (depending on how you decide to engage with the curriculum), and that you're getting and giving feedback around it.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:28:11] The takeaway from all of this is that we really encourage you to get serious—or continue to be serious—about your own learning and development. As a learning business professional, you really owe it to yourself and to those you serve to make sure that you are growing and improving. And we offer the informal learning business curriculum, which

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you can find a link to in the show notes for this episode, we offer that as a point of departure. You can use it for yourself, use it with others, and then, of course, augment it.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:28:56] We've published more than 350 episodes of the Leading Learning Podcast, but we're just getting started in terms of the areas we could explore. We truly welcome and invite your input on how we should focus our efforts going forward. What topics should we cover or go deeper on as part of our evolving informal learning business curriculum?

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:29:17] At [leadinglearning.com/episode356](http://leadinglearning.com/episode356), you'll find show notes, a full transcript, and resources related to this episode. And, on that page, you can leave a comment to suggest what else we should cover.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:29:30] At [leadinglearning.com/episode356](http://leadinglearning.com/episode356), you'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast, and, if you haven't yet, please do subscribe as subscription numbers give us some visibility into the impact of the podcast and its effectiveness as a learning resource.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:29:46] And please rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen. 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:** [00:29:58] Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one note or conversation with a colleague, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode356](http://leadinglearning.com/episode356), you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:30:16] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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