



Learning Experience Design with Diana Howles

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 358

Diana Howles: [00:00] Learning experience design is a mindset, but it's also a process and a set of principles and tools as well.

Celisa Steele: [00:14] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:23] The full, complete experience of the learner—from before she decides to sign up until after any course or event is over—should be a primary concern for all learning businesses. In this episode, number 358, we talk with return guest Diana Howles about learning experience design—what it is, why it matters, and how to implement it. Diana Howles is CEO and co-owner of Howles Associates, which specializes in virtual training, virtual presentation coaching, and learning experience design. Diana and Jeff talk about evidence-based practice, the four dimensions of learning (the cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral), learner personas, journey mapping, social proof, and the importance of feedforward (not just feedback). Their conversation about learning experience design is both conceptual and practical. Whether your learning business is already embracing LXD or yet to move beyond instructional design 1.0, we bet you'll find this conversation useful. Jeff and Diana spoke in April 2023.

Jeff Cobb: [01:39] I think it's probably useful up front to define "learning experience design." It's been a somewhat buzzy term out there for a while, and I know it can have somewhat different meanings depending on who's saying it. So what do you mean when you talk about learning experience design?

Diana Howles: [01:55] Well, you know what's really funny, Jeff? I have yet to see a definition of learning experience design that does not use the word *experience* in the definition. It's so hard to define it without saying that word. But, yes, let's talk about this. Let's talk about instructional design first. Traditional instructional design, here at Howles Associates, we view as almost like the 1.0 of instructional design. We view learning experience design, or LXD, as like the

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instructional design 2.0. In other words, it's an expanded, more modern version that gives us more modern terminology, tools, platforms with which to build these creative, engaging, meaningful, and, hopefully, impactful learning interactions.

Jeff Cobb: [02:51] That's an interesting distinction. When I think of instructional design traditionally, I'm thinking of things like the ADDIE model: analyze, design, develop, implement, and evaluate. What's different about learning experience design? Is ADDIE gone? How do you go about this instructional design 2.0?

Diana Howles: [03:11] That's a great question. A lot of learning experience design does incorporate things like iterative design and more collaboration with users, stakeholders, and learners on the front end. So it is more akin to something like Michael Allen's SAM, which is the Successive Approximation Model. Rapid prototyping, iterative, and bringing in feedback and input from the beginning. We see more of that. Certainly ADDIE still has a place, but we're seeing more of the progression to that agile movement forward. When I think about learning experience design, it's this holistic approach. It is more of a mindset than a process, and, really, it's learner-centered and task-centered for a learning solution. It ideally integrates the cognitive, emotional, social, and the behavioral dimensions of learning.

Jeff Cobb: [04:10] I definitely want to come back to that because that seems very important to this. I know it's something that you write and talk about relative to learning experience design. But, before we get there, why has LXD become such a focus? Why is it a buzz term? What needed to be corrected, I guess, basically? What needed to evolve?

Diana Howles: [04:31] That's a great question, Jeff. I'm sure our listeners, too, are thinking of lots of things. What comes to my mind is that we really had this introduction to this idea of user experience design back with Apple in the 1990s. Then we saw that grow. And then we saw, in the healthcare industry, we started talking about patient experience. And then we see now customer experience (CX), the voice of the customer, and it's just grown and grown. Now learner experience really encompasses what is that experience? We really, ideally, want to help improve the experience the learner has while they're learning.

Jeff Cobb: [05:09] I think with our listeners, the learner typically is the customer. So, when you're doing learning experience, you're also doing customer experience and, obviously, user experience as well. Experience is everywhere, it seems like these days. I know there's this whole field of design thinking out there that connects in to user experience design and then all of the other types of design. How does design thinking factor into learning experience design?

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Diana Howles: [05:38] I love that question. I wrote a book called *Next Level Virtual Training: Advance Your Facilitation*, and I've devoted a whole chapter (chapter two) to learning experience design as it relates to virtual training. But, in that chapter, I also talk about how, at least here at Howles Associates, we see the influence on learning experience design from at least three main streams. One of those being the one you just mentioned, Jeff, which is design thinking. Another one being user experience design. And a third one that we're calling evidence-based practice, which is really more of this broad term, which encompasses cognitive neuroscience, the learning sciences, psychology, and evidence-based research—all of that together. But, if we look back at user experience design, we have the great benefit of looking at user testing and, again, wanting to improve the user's experience with the technology. In design thinking, we really bring in these influences, if you will, about empathy, learner empathy, user empathy, and also including learners in our context on the front end, bringing them in and inviting them into the design process, where they can speak into designs when they're still rough and not yet crafted or finalized but just get those ideas. Again, that speaks back to what we talked about before, Jeff, with that iterative design—rapid, rapid, rapid successive attempts to keep improving very quickly. But getting that feedback early on, which, here at Howles Associates, we like to call “feedforward,” because sometimes feedback comes too late. So we're asking for feedforward very early on and, ideally, throughout.

Jeff Cobb: [07:28] We hear again and again across so many different aspects of the learning business just how important it is to get that, as you said, feedforward early in the process, to really be engaged with your prospective users, with your actual users, and find out how they're thinking about things, what they would want to do in a particular situation, what kind of outcomes they're looking for, and to factor that in. Because we all know the whole “if you build it, they will come” problem that so many organizations have faced over time, and they just don't come. That's often because they have not really been consulted on what it is they wanted in the first place.

Diana Howles: [08:04] That's exactly right.

Jeff Cobb: [08:05] I like that evidence-based aspect of it, as you were saying, too. When you think about what most of the evidence about learning says, it's that learning is active. Learning takes effort to know. Learning involves the learner engaging and doing things. That may mean cognitively doing things like reflecting, but it's not a passive experience. I think of learning experience design as oriented more towards the active, towards really getting, as you said, learner-centric—the learner is engaged in the process.

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Diana Howles: [08:36] Absolutely agree. If we really were to summarize it in a nutshell, I would say that, in learning experience design, we are leaning into the experience the learner is having while they're learning, not the content they are consuming.

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Jeff Cobb: [10:12] Let's come back to the four dimensions of learning: the cognitive, emotional, social, and behavioral. Can you say a bit more about each one of those dimensions and then why it's important to incorporate them?

Diana Howles: [10:28] Sure. Let's start with the cognitive one. The cognitive learning dimension has probably received the most attention. I think nobody would really argue that. We know it's important to use the cognitive function. When you talk about cognitive dimensions of learning—and, by the way, I'm basing this model of those four dimensions from Simone Conceição and Les Howles's book *Designing the Online Learning Experience*. They developed that framework of those four dimensions, which, then, I also reference in my book. But this cognitive dimension, we can do so much more with that. As you mentioned, Jeff, there's the passive versus the active experience. An active experience, for example, cognitively, might include more reflection and pausing for reflection. It might include asking more questions of the learners as they are learning or as they are learning segments of different types of activities or content. So that's the cognitive piece. The emotional one is the one that we have almost really not given enough attention to, and, as you'll notice, over the past several years, people have rediscovered, "Oh my goodness, we forgot about how important emotion is." You'll hear Michael Allen

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talking about that. You'll hear Dr. Richard Mayer talking about that. You'll hear Clark Quinn talking about that.

Diana Howles: [11:51] The emotional dimension is so important because we've learned from neuroscience that we cannot separate decision-making and emotion. Educational neuroscientist Janet Zadina says you cannot separate learning from emotions. They're so tightly integrated. So why is that important? Well, think about motivation—adult learners' motivation. We want them to be very excited about what they're going to be learning. We want them to see why it's important to them. We want them to understand how it will benefit them. All of those motivational elements. And then the third one would be the social dimension. We are social beings. Very important when we're in the virtual setting, too, for those purposeful connection times, to have cameras on for both online and on-site. We can see and hear people. We can have rich discussions with each other. We are social beings. Then the behavioral is really the doing. I don't know what our listeners think of this, but it seems like so much of our learning solutions that we produce are more about what we know. Or it's all about something versus doing. When we talk about application, it's important to have that doing aspect. Bringing the behavioral dimension into a learning solution means we are practicing, we are doing teach-backs, we're doing role plays, and we're practicing giving constructive feedback. Whatever it is we're learning about, we're practicing that. And then, ideally, we would take that right back to our work environment, our organizations. Those are the four dimensions, which really is, again, a holistic approach. They tightly interweave, and sometimes there's overlap too. But creating experiences intentionally that include these dimensions, then, is what our goal is.

Jeff Cobb: [13:51] You've already started to point to this a bit in what you're saying about the dimensions, how this actually plays out, and the things you do to tap into these different dimensions, but I was wondering if we could do an exhibit A/exhibit B thing here, where exhibit A is your prototypical old-style learning intervention. They're often called "interventions" in the old-style way of doing things. I know you do a lot with live virtual-type training. Let's say it's that, and it's your standard you've-got-your-subject-matter-expert-presenter-on-a-Webinar. It's the presenter and his or her PowerPoint deck. Everybody's been to thousands of these in their careers. What does that look like if you apply LXD principles and make sure you're addressing those four dimensions, moving from that exhibit A, traditional, to an exhibit B that is much more ideal?

Diana Howles: [14:48] I love it. Let's do it. All right, everybody, so exhibit A, we would have just that traditional Webinar. This is one-to-many. It's very didactic. We're really thinking about it being content-centric. So this facilitator is probably doing a lecturette with very little

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interaction, maybe a few polls if it's done through the virtual training venue, but mainly lecture. And so you look at the learners, and they're very passive. It's more sit-and-get. Let's say that was about virtual training. You basically have an expert telling others what helps to be a skilled virtual facilitator, but a passive audience. Exhibit B, let's transition to that. There, instead of content-centric, it's learner-centric but also task-centric because it's still about reaching our goals and outcomes. Let's say, in this scenario, the learning experience really is everything from A to Z. It could be a welcome video that learners receive well before class day that gets them excited about "This is what you're going to be able to do" and builds motivation in them to do that. And then, on class day, when we talk about the objectives, you have those designed learning objectives that drive your design, but then you convert them into questions that are more motivating for your learners. So you keep the traditional objectives for you in your design, but then we translate them into something that's more motivational statements for them.

Diana Howles: [16:25] And then, as we go through the learning, we do teach-backs. They're practicing how to facilitate and get feedback. That's part of the doing. They also have the ability to, let's say, in the social realm, have discussion groups on different topics that we talk about. They have the chat forum as well. But they're interacting. We're asking good, thoughtful questions. We're giving space to people so that they can have that social element involved. Then, cognitively, we are challenging them. Like I said, we have an action plan, and they have a reflection and a space where they can think about it. And then, afterward, we send messages to their managers and say, "These are the action plans that your staff created. Please meet with them in the next two weeks to talk about how they can execute their action plans, and let them know how you can support them. Here are some prompts, by the way, that may be helpful when you have these discussions." You really see the contrast of how it's more integrated and expanded. LXD, the way we talk about it at Howles Associates, we're incorporating those dimensions of being able to think about it, feel about it, interact with others socially, and do something.

Jeff Cobb: [17:45] Just hearing and listening to that, it's a much richer experience. Obviously, you don't have to do all of those things when you're putting together this more instructional-design-2.0-type experience, but you can do a lot of those things. There are a lot of possibilities available in Webinars and other types of virtual live training that I think learning businesses have just not fully appreciated or tapped into before. I think we're always trying to think through ways.... A podcast can be a fairly passive medium because you're usually sitting in a car and listening, that sort of thing. But we do always like to challenge listeners to reflect on what's being said here. And, I would say, think about your own exhibit A because I think a lot of listeners probably have plenty of exhibit As in their portfolios. And think about some of those

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exhibit B characteristics that you could potentially take advantage of. Look at them as opportunities for your learning experiences. And, for listeners, if you have to stop and rewind and listen to that again—or you'll be able to go to the episode page for this episode and look at the transcript there and see everything Diana just said—but don't just sit there passively. Think about what you can actually do with what we're discussing here around that more ideal learning experience.

Jeff Cobb: [19:06] Can you talk a little bit more about some of the essential strategies and practices for applying LXD when you are developing your new offerings?

Diana Howles: [19:15] Absolutely. One of the things is something that we referred to earlier, Jeff, and that's this idea of bringing in target learners (if you target learners) early on to the design process. Something that you can do is do some interviews with either some of the actual learners, representative learners, or customers in this case—so one or two or three. You do interviews, you have conversations with them, you can do focus groups, you get to know their demographics, and then you come back to the table. You can either bring them in and run ideas by them, or you can create what's called learner personas. I'm sure some of our listeners have experimented with this. The idea is that we create a fictional character. This is Ria. This is Joe. This is Robert. This is Susan. We give them characteristics. Project manager, has been working there for five years. Or somebody who's a new hire, and they are more shy. Or somebody else is a leader. But we give them characteristics, and we imagine that they are their part of the experience. You can even have characters. You can use a lot of the software and applications that are available today to create a fictional character there and give them a name. As you're designing, you have them right at the forefront, and you're thinking, "How would this target learner respond to this? What would help this individual?"

Diana Howles: [20:40] As you know, Jeff, there's the idea of the false consensus effect, which basically says that we have this tendency or bias to assume that everyone thinks like us, or what I know, you know too. But that is not the reality. We are all very different. Using personas and learner personas on the front end helps us address that. Because, we joke, we think we know our customers, and we don't. We're very different. So bringing them in on the front end, as you may have experienced too, that's where you get some of your best ideas. My business partner was developing a leadership development course—which I do talk about this story in the book—and he actually invited some target learners in and provided them with pizza. He changed the trajectory of that course, and that course was so successful, but it was because he incorporated the feedback of a few target learners very early on.

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Jeff Cobb: [21:40] Absolutely. Again, it just comes up so often—really engaging with your audience and making sure that you are incorporating their perspectives. Any other key tips that you would offer to listeners around designing their learning experiences?

Diana Howles: [21:54] Yes, there's another tool as well that learners are welcome to experiment with, and that is journey mapping. Again, you think about, if we were to take virtual training as the context, if you think about a blended learning solution, where there's some pre-work, then maybe there's the live online course with some assignments, and then maybe there's some more post-work, you think about what is the learner going to feel at this point in the course—the pre, the live, and the post? What are they going to do? What kinds of things are you going to do? What kinds of things would they be thinking about? As you sketch this out, it really stretches you. The learner personas help you shift your mindset. But these journey maps that you create to guide the design, they're very insightful, and they inform you about sometimes making changes for the better good of the learning solution. Just tools to help us out of our own mindset. By the way, learning experience design is a mindset, but it's also a process and a set of principles and tools as well.

Jeff Cobb: [23:05] It's occurred to me, as we've been talking, to me, this sounds like, yes, this is what we need to be doing. Of course, we need to be thinking about learning as an experience and designing in a way to support that. But do you get any pushback? Do you find people who are uncomfortable, who are like, "No, I like ADDIE. I've always done it this way. This is how I'm going to continue to do it"? How receptive are organizations and the people you work with, in your experience, to this approach to creating learning?

Diana Howles: [23:33] Absolutely. I do have one client who definitely wants to use ADDIE and will continue to use ADDIE. But I have introduced other things to that client. So, for example, bringing in early feedback, focus groups, changing the design, and then user testing early on. I have introduced those kinds of things. But, yes, they are definitely committed to using ADDIE for now, which is fine. But I think you do hear a lot of different perspectives. There are those who insist that LXD is just a rebrand of instructional design. Or learning experience design is instructional design plus learning sciences. There's just a lot of, I guess, not real good clarity around what learning experience design is. But, like I said, I like to think about it as an instructional design 2.0. It's rejuvenating this discipline and expanding it from where we were, growing it. It's evolving. And now we have even more tool sets and, as I mentioned, terms with which to talk about how to make good design. So some people will argue, yes, "I think skilled instructional designers have been doing learning experience design all along," and I would

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agree with that. Why? Because they're learner- or customer-centered, and they keep that at the forefront. So that's what's driving us, not this content-centric approach.

Jeff Cobb: [24:58] I think that probably is what it comes down to. No matter what you call this, if what you're doing is really centered on the learner and you really are using evidence-based approaches to achieving what the learner needs to achieve, then you're probably doing learning experience design, whether you're calling it that or not in the end. Well, as we're wrapping up, maybe we can flip the table a little bit. We've asked you before about your approaches to lifelong learning because you've been on the show relatively recently, so I won't ask you about that, but I would love your perspective—and I think this could be a useful mindset for listeners to get into as well because it is taking that learner mindset and how would a learner approach this—but, for you, if you're trying to assess whether a particular learning offering really does adhere to those LXD principles—that it is learner-centric, that it is evidence-based, that it is going to provide that really effective learning experience—what clues do you look for as the consumer, as the customer for a learning experience?

Diana Howles: [25:59] I really love the challenge of that question. I think, ideally, we're looking at the outcomes. Remember, it's learner-centered, but it's also task-based. If we break down the word *learning experience design*, *learning* is about outcomes. We have to have goals, learner goals, and they have to be achieved. The second word *experience* is about what we've talked a lot about today, incorporating the four dimensions, and really making sure that it's an integration, a very tightly woven integration, and interaction with all sorts of things. You think about when you bring home a product that you're excited about. You have a good experience at the store or online when you buy it. Finally, the product comes to your home. The box is beautiful. It's aesthetically pleasing. You open the product. It works. It's functional. Then you go and get customer support or tech support, and it's helpful, and your issues get resolved. That whole experience from A to Z is pleasant, motivating, easy, and intuitive, and you're satisfied by it. All of that.

Diana Howles: [27:05] Then the last word, *design*. This idea of creating and building something, and we're putting more emphasis on that design part right up front because sometimes we think about development as the bigger chunk, but, actually, design is where we need to be front-loading it because, in a sense, we go slower to go faster. Up front, if we go slower, we go faster. But I think when you talk about how do you assess whether something is really effective or not, I would look at the evaluation. I would look and see what are learners saying about that learning solution. Was it impactful? Was it meaningful to them? Was it engaging? Were they able to learn? It's hard to look at a solution and say, "Well, did they use learner personas to

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create this? Did they really get feedback? What is involved with that?" But I would look at the evaluation data and see what learners are saying. Were they able to successfully apply this, and did it make a difference when they were back in their organization?

Jeff Cobb: [28:10] We've talked a lot over the years on the show and articles we've written about the importance of social proof, testimonials, and things like that around the learning experiences that you create. I think a lot of organizations say, "Yeah, yeah" and kind of put that off. But, really, if you want other learners to know that what you're doing is impactful, those are the best people to hear it from. It's people that you've already been successful with before. So it's just a takeaway item, an action item for folks who are listening today. It all comes back to the learning experience you're creating and what people are going to say about that in the end. So go get that social proof. Go get those testimonials.

Celisa Steele: [28:56] Diana Howles is the author of *Next Level Virtual Training: Advance Your Facilitation* and CEO of Howles Associates, which specializes in virtual training, virtual presentation coaching, and learning experience design.

Jeff Cobb: [29:11] In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode358, you'll find a link to the Howles Associate Web site, where you can learn more about Diana's work and her *Next Level Virtual Training* book.

Celisa Steele: [29:23] Jeff and I would be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable, because ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [29:36] And please spread the word about Leading Learning, whether in one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note or on social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode358, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [29:52] 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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