



Practicing What We Preach

Leading Learning Podcast
Transcript for Episode 377

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Practice is a powerful tool for learning, and, when you stop to look at what you do on a daily or weekly basis, you'll see how common and natural practice is in so many realms. But too often learning businesses don't incorporate practice into their portfolio of offerings.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:22] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:23] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:31] Jeff, as you know, probably all too well, we have a typical cycle on the Leading Learning Podcast. We tend to have a you-and-me episode, then you do an interview, then I do an interview, and then we repeat that sort of ad nauseam—not ad nauseam, but....

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:47] Let's hope it's not ad nauseam!

Celisa Steele: [00:00:49] But I thought that today we could mix things up just a tiny bit. Nothing too radical, but I thought I'd like to interview you because I know that you're engaged in a project, a project that involves practice, and I thought it might make for an interesting topic of discussion.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:07] Well, I'm game. We'll see how good of an interviewee I actually am.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:12] That's right, turning the tables on you here. In this episode, number 377, we're going to focus on practice, but in a very specific way. Rather than take the learning science-backed view of practice, we're going to take a practical, case-study-based approach. So, Jeff, I think to start things off, what I'd like to ask you to do is to outline this performance project that I know you have going on.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:42] Sure. And I'll preface by saying this did not start out as a project. It wasn't until I was kind of into it that I realized I was into something and maybe....

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Celisa Steele: [00:01:52] Well, that was going to be one of my questions, whether this started as a project or whether it evolved into a project. So I'm going to scratch that question. But, anyhow, tell us about what turned out to be a performance project.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:04] Sure. As some listeners may have picked up somewhere along the way or in following me in general, one of my—I guess this would be an avocation; it's a little stronger than a hobby—is playing the guitar and writing songs. I am comfortable describing myself as a singer-songwriter, I guess. It feels a little presumptuous at times, but I do in fact do that. I have written many songs, and I play them and perform them, and I have been doing that on and off since I was a teenager, basically.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:39] Are you saying you're no longer a teenager?

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:40] Believe it or not. I know looks can be deceiving, but I am no longer a teenager. And I will say too that there was a period of time I entered into, after young adulthood, when things like career, family, and things like that came along, where I did significantly less singing and songwriting. And then, at some point a few years ago, I started picking it back up and saying, "I'd really like to get serious about this. It's been a long time since I've written much new material." I wasn't really satisfied with the quality of the material I was writing at the times that I did finally manage to put a little bit of time in it. And so a couple things occurred to me. One is that I have written some decent things in the past that people seem to like. And, just as part of what I would like to have, I guess, documented from my life, I wanted to finally professionally record those, not just sitting in the garage or the guest bedroom with a digital recording setup but actually getting somebody who knows how to do production to work with me and to record an album of music. So I decided that, and I've also decided along the same time that I really wanted to be much more disciplined about writing songs and becoming a great performer of songs.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:59] A great performer.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:00] A great performer. I would like to be at least an above-average performer of songs. I do a lot of open mic nights—that's something we can talk about. And you can tell, when people show up at open mic nights, for some of them, I'm picking up the guitar for the first time in a year, and I feel like going out to play some songs, and they can be perfectly good and enjoyable, but they're going to be a little rough around the edges and that sort of thing. And then you have the people come in who, you can tell, they're either playing in a band and

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it's just a way for them to go out and do a little bit of extra or try something new on their own, or they've genuinely been practicing to show up at the open mic. So you get those differences in performers, certainly. We, for example, went to see Bruce Springsteen a few months ago, and, to me, it was remarkable how professional and polished a performer he actually is. Obviously, the guy's a legend, and he's been doing this forever, but you can tell he still takes it very seriously, and that band is putting in a lot of practice time. I guess I'm belaboring the performance point, but that was important to me along with improving my writing skills.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:10] I'll try to summarize, based both on what you said and what I already know outside of this conversation of what you're trying to achieve. But you have this goal of getting better at the performance of your own songs, and, coupled with that, you had this idea of going into a studio to record. And all of that then gave you the idea of focusing more on practicing.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:35] Right.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:37] And so then, as part of that practice, you have been going out and performing as often as you can.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:43] I have been, to the extent that my kids are probably wondering where I am a lot of the time. We live in an area where there are plenty of open mic opportunities and other types of performance opportunities, even if you're not professionally booked to play. And I have just started trying to get to every one of those that I can, as many times a week as I can, to continually play songs that I may have written long ago but want to be much, much better at playing. And I've been modifying those and trying to make them better songs but then also new songs that I'm creating and getting out there and playing in front of an audience as much as possible. We can talk about what surrounds that as well. But that's the main thing—getting out and playing as much as I possibly can.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:32] Well, one question I had was around how you think about the balance of playing newer songs—songs that you've just written—versus songs that you wrote a decade ago. Do you try to balance that either within an open mic evening, so some evening you might do a conscious choice of it's going to be 50-50, newer and older? Or do you tend to think about it across different open mics? Thursday's open mic, I'm going to play the oldies but goodies, at least to yourself, you know those. And then Friday maybe you're going to play the newer things. So do you think about that balance of the things that you know better versus the things that are a little bit more difficult for you to perform?

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Jeff Cobb: [00:07:18] I definitely think about it. I'm very intentional about it. It doesn't play out in any truly formulaic way. I suspect it's true for most people with whatever they're trying to get better at in their lives. They'll think about the different contexts that they're going into, more or less consciously, and then try to calibrate for that context as to what they're going to try, what they're going to practice, what they're going to perform in that particular circumstance. So I do always try to play something at least a bit newer whenever I'm going to play in front of an audience. That said, I want to balance it—as much as I'm willing to put myself out there, without a net and try things, I also want to have some reasonable sense that I'm going to be able to do it successfully or, at least, close enough to successfully that I'm not going to go home and feel terrible the rest of the night. And that can vary because, in some cases, that might be a brand-new song, something I've never played publicly before, which you have to get in front of an audience at some point. At some point, you have to decide, "I'm ready to do that." A lot of times recently, it's been taking songs that are quite old—or at least a year or two old, if not older than that—that I've changed in some fundamental way, added some part to.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:36] I've been working with a producer around this to come up with new approaches, fills, and things like that that are actually making the songs much more difficult for me to play than they used to be. And so I have to get comfortable at trying those out in front of people as well. And then it depends on where I'm going to play because, like I said, I do a lot of open mics because that's an easy thing to fit into the schedule and get out there and do. But one open mic I go to is very casual, people who are definitely more hobbyists, just there sitting around, chatting, playing a little music in the background. In that context, I'm willing to try pretty much anything. That's my completely work-without-a-net environment. If I completely crash and burn, I don't care that much. I'm not going to feel bad about it. But I was at an open mic just last night where the talent level was really high. That's a different context, and you want to feel like you can rise to that caliber of the people around you, and it's going to affect the choices of what I play in that particular environment.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:43] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you are looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

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Celisa Steele: [00:10:19] I'm not a singer-songwriter, as you know, Jeff. I just want to make that clear to listeners. I don't actually know the answer to this. I'm curious to know. When you're talking about new songs, there are lyrics, and then there's the music that goes along with it. How much of that do you memorize? And, again, I'm thinking about the bigger learning picture here. We're going to take these lessons learned from your example of practicing in this specific context and hopefully tease out some bigger-picture things that we can talk about. And so I'm thinking about things like cognitive load. I'm thinking if it's a new song with new lyrics and new music, that's a pretty heavy cognitive lift to try to do that. Are you memorizing those things, and so, when you perform, you're essentially drawing on your memory to do it?

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:05] That's certainly my ideal, to have memorized things. But I think, like with anything else, sometimes you need that job aid to get you through. In addition to open mics, I also participate in a songwriter circle. This happens on Zoom these days, sort of a vestige of COVID times. In some cases, with that group, if I've got something really new—because that's often the place where if it's something brand-new, whether it's a new part in a song or a completely new song—I will often be looking at a lyric sheet or a lyric and music sheet when I'm playing that because I have not committed it to memory yet. But, when I stand up in front of an audience—and not everybody is this way; I definitely see people play with their iPad or whatever in front of them that has the stuff on it—I'd prefer to have it memorized or be close enough to memory that I don't think I'm going to mess anything up. That said, it's always surprising when you're actually performing, even if you are not consciously nervous or experiencing any anxiety—which I feel like I rarely do these days because I've done it enough—it still affects you, and you'll still end up tripping up, not hitting a string in the way you meant to, or I'll forget the words to my own songs or screw up the words to my own songs all the time, even though I've sung them for years and years. So it is an interesting thing. It's the cognitive load, and then again it's the context.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:28] It's the varied practice, right?

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:29] It's the varied practice, yes.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:30] Right. Where you need to try it out in different situations because your bedroom versus a stage in front of other people—yes, big difference. I'm also curious do you think about cadence? And, again, I'm thinking about what you and I both know about learning. I'm thinking a little bit about things like spaced repetition and effortful retrieval. That's effortful to say—effortful retrieval. But are you thinking about, okay, well, really, it would be better in this what's turned into a project to do three open mics every week over the course of three

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months versus 21 days in a row of open mics? Or are you thinking at all about that when you're looking at it?

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:17] I do think about it. Some of it is just the practicalities of what's available, what fits my schedule, and things like that. But my aim, because I am very much aware of spaced repetition, spaced practice, is to try to do multiple performances a week, whether that's an open mic or something more extensive. They're going to be different because you're not going to have an open mic in the same place night after night, or, in most cases, you're not going to perform in the same place night after night, so that will be broken up. My preference is for there to be a little bit of time. It's not Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday. Maybe it's Monday, Wednesday, Friday that I'm doing that, just to have a little bit of that rest time in between.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:58] I'm a runner too, and I don't run every day because I want my body to recover and to benefit from the exertion it's had so that the next time I do it, I'm that much more prepared, and I think the same thing applies with just about any type of practice or performance. So, yes, I don't want to do crammed-type stuff. I've often played at this annual event, which I still do, and one of the things I liked about it was it got me focused back again on songwriting. But what would often happen is I'd end up spending the two or three days before that out in the garage, practicing as much as I possibly could before showing up at that event, which was better than doing nothing. But it wasn't ideal for how to really prepare for getting up on a stage and being comfortable in front of an audience.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:43] We know that feedback is very important for improved performance, and so, here you are, putting in all these practice hours with the goal of improved performance. What does feedback look like in this context? Is it more indirect, that, "Oh, your grandmother made cookies" sort of sound? I've heard that used in poetry situations. So it's like, "Oh!" That's like, "Oh, okay now," that sound of satisfaction. Is it that? Or how enthusiastic or unenthusiastic the applause is? Or do you actually get verbal feedback from those situations that then helps you improve?

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:21] Yes, it's definitely a little of both, and there's an extra dimension. I think we even said this type of thing before on the podcast. When you're practicing a musical instrument—and there are other analogous things you could be doing, I think—but the feedback from a musical instrument is very direct because, if you hit a wrong note, unless you're completely tone deaf, you know you hit a wrong note. You're getting instant feedback from the instrument itself, and you get that from your voice too, if you're at all tuned into that.

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You know whether you're singing well or not. So you've got that built into the system, but then, when you're standing in front of an audience, you're looking out at the audience, and it depends on the lighting. In some cases, the lighting is such that you really can't see people's faces or how they're reacting, but you can still usually get a sense of the room. Last night I was playing in a place, it's a bar, and the musicians on stage are backdrop for the most part, and everybody's talking and chatting and drinking their drinks and everything.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:18] If they happen to turn away from that at all and pay attention to you, that's a pretty good sign because they're usually not going to do that. And, if they happen to be watching you the whole time, then you're like, "Well, I've got some connection here." But then usually, once you come off the stage with a performance like that, there's going to be applause, and you can usually tell a little difference between just polite applause and a little more enthusiasm there. And then typically there's going to be a certain amount of people coming up and saying, "Hey, I really like that last song" or "Great stuff." That sort of thing. Some of that's purely polite, particularly if you're playing around other musicians. Everybody's going to say that to each other. But sometimes you'll have somebody random from the audience come up and say, "Wow, I love that. That was great." And those are the nights where you feel like, "Ah, doing something right."

Celisa Steele: [00:17:05] So to use the learning world again here, what you've talked about so far sounds like the smile sheet equivalent—that's whether people liked it or not. Are you actually getting feedback that helps you improve performance at this?

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:20] That's an interesting question. I will at times try out variations on songs. I play the guitar, so some things I will strum, some things I will finger pick, and sometimes I will change that up and play a song that I typically strum with finger picking and vice versa, and just see what the reaction is to that. Sometimes I'll play much more rhythmically. Sometimes I'll change the key that I'm playing in. So, in those sorts of situations, I can usually get what feels like some relatively concrete feedback around did that change work. Is that something that I should do or not do again, based on what I've gotten from the audience?

Celisa Steele: [00:18:02] We've talked pretty specifically about what you're experiencing, what you're trying. If you had to think about what you've learned from this project so far that would apply more broadly to learning, what comes to mind?

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:18] I think, with learning anything, there's always the difference between knowing something intellectually, getting to the point where you're competent with application

of it, and then getting to the point where it's built into you. You can just flat-out do it. And practice typically gets you from knowledge to competence, I think. And then a lot of practice gets you from competence to true fluency and fluidity. One of the things that I take home every night from playing anywhere is, "My gosh, I've got to practice a lot more." I'll never be done practicing.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:06] I've heard you talk about this as your mini 10,000 hours, so maybe we can unpack that a little bit. Ten thousand hours—that was certainly popularized by Malcolm Gladwell, drawing on, I think, some Eric An....

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:22] Anders Ericsson's work.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:22] Anders Ericsson's work, yes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:24] Around practice. That's what he really focuses on.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:27] And, actually, they were specifically looking at musicians, as I recall.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:31] Musicians were a big part of Ericsson's work. He looked particularly at violin players in the level of seriousness and practice. What Gladwell picked up on—which I don't think came out of Ericsson; I think it just came out of Gladwell being a storyteller and a reporter—is the Beatles in Hamburg and the early days of the band and how they played hours and hours each day, day in and day out for years, and that's really how the Beatles became.... Because whatever you think of the Beatles, they had their act together. They were tight musically, harmonically, everything. And that was just from a ton of practice. The idea is that you need this equivalent of 10 years or 10,000 hours of practice to really get to that expert level, that fluidity and fluency that I was talking about. Now, that's controversial. There a lot of people have said, "No, that's not right," and Gladwell hyped it, and all sorts of other stuff. But still, it's, I think, a useful tool, rule of thumb, heuristic, however you want to look at it, for just how important practice is, regardless of what your starting talent level is.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:42] I'd be curious to get your thoughts on what value you see in practice. You've talked about coming home every night and thinking, "Wow, there's still so much practice to do." I think we're just saying that you have to keep practicing—that's the takeaway from 10,000 hours. Because, even if you buy into the 10,000 hours, it's not like you hit 10,000 hours, and then you never have to practice again to keep being a good musician. So what value do you see in having a project focus around practice? You have this goal of getting better before

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going into a studio. Do you feel like that helps focus the practice? And what do you do then when the project ends, but you still need to keep the practice going?

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:31] Yes, it definitely helped in this case to have that goal, and I think that's so true in life, just in general, to have deadlines or specific places that you're trying to reach. In all honesty, I had started doing something very practice-oriented before I got to this point, and then I think adding in this ultimate goal to it notched things up several steps. Because for two or three years before this—and I think I've talked about this or at least written about it in different places—I basically said I'm going to get up every morning and spend 15 to 30 minutes focused on songwriting. I'm going to listen to a couple of songs that I've never listened to before from singer-songwriters, and I'm going to write for at least 10 or 15 minutes. And even if it's just one word, I'm at least putting the time into doing that. And I've already been doing that. But that was indefinite.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:27] And, to be honest, I plan to keep doing that indefinitely. But then putting in this idea of, okay, here's a project, here's a goal that really defines this and takes it somewhere, definitely kicked things up several notches and brought that focus in. I think it's so important. You don't want to, I think, always have that, or it's difficult to always have this project that you're working on. Sometimes you need to be able to not exactly coast but do the work. But then, every once in a while, build in these points in time and achievement that you're going to try to get to. I think it is extremely useful. I don't know exactly what the research is around that. I suspect there probably is research saying, yes, if you want to keep going up—we've talked about the S curve before on the podcast—there's probably something of this in the S curve that you start to plateau after a while, and you have to have something that then kicks you up to that next level.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:29] So part of what I hear in what you're sharing, Jeff, is just a very personal story of learning, a very personal story of practice. But I think that can be valuable to us. We do everything at Leading Learning for learning business professionals. We consider ourselves to be learning business professionals. But I think it sometimes gets lost, in all of the work that we're doing, that we are also learners. And so I think when we remember that we're learners, when we take time to let ourselves really focus on learning something, it helps us empathize with the learners that we serve, and it helps us realize what are some of the most effective ways to support learning, like practice.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:16] I think so much of it is just being conscious and intentional in our own lives because we're all engaging in practice all the time. The story that we just shared from me

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happened to be an instance where I recognized I was doing that and was intentional and conscious about it. I think we probably all, if we just step back and look at our lives, realize that there are probably areas where we are consistently engaged in practice, and we want to be a little more intentional and conscious about them. But then, back to this whole world of the learning business, continuing education, professional development, we know from our own experience and having worked with so many organizations for so many years that often the practice opportunities aren't really built into those. I think there's an assumption that, if you have a Webinar, or somebody shows up at a conference, and they get the knowledge that the presenter or whoever is going to give to them, they're going to take it upon themselves to go back and apply that and practice it, which might be their intention. But, as they say, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions."

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:20] People get back to the office; it doesn't happen. So I think for learning businesses to get more intentional and conscious about the role of practice relative to the learning experiences they're offering and how might they help to make those practice opportunities available, whether it's something as simple as an assessment or an exam at the end of some course of learning that they're offering, or whether it's actually documenting and following up on good practice opportunities that can be applied back in the workspace. There are a lot of ways that learning businesses could be thinking about the role of practice and then implementing it better than we see happen.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:59] Yes, metacognition. This is this idea of we're going to pay attention to how we're thinking. And so, when it is learning, it's about how and why do we learn better at certain times than at others. And, even hearing you share your story, Jeff, it sounds like you have potentially had this realization that having the more specific goal is really going to allow you to carve out a larger chunk of time to devote to practicing than you would have if it had just been this ongoing daily practice. And just having that moment of realization like that then allows you to know, "Okay, good. Well, then the next time I really want to up my game in whatever else, maybe I need to provide a project." So it's this awareness. If we can bring it to our own lives and what we're learning and then think about how do we translate into how we better serve our learners. Essentially, this is all about practicing what we preach.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:54] Yes, definitely.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:56] And I will mention too that we have a new executive briefing on practice that's been put out recently. That's called "Practice Makes Profit: The Business and Learning Case for Practice." You can go to the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode377

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to find out how you can get access to that executive briefing. It takes more of that learning science-backed approach to practice. This today was obviously much more of a personal story of practice, but we think both are very powerful. And, obviously, that title is playing a little bit with the phrase “practice makes perfect,” which I think we’ve all heard before. And, as we’ve been talking, I’ve been thinking about, as I often like to do, the linguistic underpinnings of things. And, if I think about verb tenses, in verb tenses perfect means something that’s in the past, something that’s been done. And so, in that sense, practice is about perfect. It’s about things that are done. It’s about doing things. And so I think, to me, that was a little aha moment there around practice makes perfect. It ties to this act. We have to take action. We have to perform something. We have to apply something.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:10] Definitely. And, of course, because we did change it to “Practice Makes Profit,” as you might expect and as the subtitle says, we’re talking about this from a business perspective too, that there is a strong business case for offering practice, which we go into in that briefing.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:27] Right. To us and to our minds, for learning businesses, the learning case and the business case are tightly intertwined because what benefits the learner—and practice clearly does; we have lots of research and science showing that—if you’re producing those more effective product offerings for your learners, then that does represent revenue for your learning business. And so then there’s the strong business case to go along with it. But, again, we encourage you to check out that executive briefing for a different look at practice than what we offered today.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:06] Practice is a powerful tool for learning, and, when you stop to look at what you do on a daily or weekly basis, you’ll see how common and natural practice is in so many realms. But too often learning businesses don’t incorporate practice into their portfolio of offerings.

Celisa Steele: [00:29:23] And we want to help change that. So at leadinglearning.com/episode377, you’ll find a link to the executive briefing we just recently published called “Practice Makes Profit: The Business and Learning Case for Practice.” And at leadinglearning.com/episode377, you’ll also find show notes, a full transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast, if you’re not already subscribed.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:48] And we’d be grateful if you’d take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Celisa and I personally appreciate

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reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:04] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one note or a conversation with a colleague, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode377, you'll find links to connect with us on X (formerly Twitter), LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:22] 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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