Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Make time to reflect on the past, take stock, celebrate progress and accomplishments, and then set goals and intentions for the future. Do this for yourself and for your learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:16] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:18] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:26] Welcome to episode 391 of the Leading Learning Podcast. Though this episode won't air until January, Jeff, you and I are recording at the end of December, and so we want to engage in some year-end reflection, which has become a bit of a tradition for us, taking time to take stock.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:45] That's true. A good tradition. And we're sharing our reflections as a reminder and encouragement to you, dear listener, to make the time to reflect on your own and, if it's relevant, with your team. Reflection is just a good practice—a great practice—but it's all too easy to skip since taking time to reflect isn't as pressing and urgent as many things on our to-do list and since it doesn't necessarily have a concrete outcome. But reflection is an important activity for a learning business and those working in and for learning businesses. Celisa, you and I are part of a learning business ourselves, and we'll try to be avatars and model the kind of behavior and reflection we encourage others to engage in.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:33] So when we look back at 2023, I think it would be interesting, perhaps, to think about wins from 2023. And we've been asking this question, "What is something you would consider a win from the year past?" We've been asking that in a variety of contexts. We've asked it in a Webinar. We've asked it in a staff meeting. We've asked it in a mastermind that we're facilitating. And, in general, it's a good question because it both prompts the reflection that is so important that we're talking about, but it also is this opportunity to celebrate, and I think there's a lot of good that can come from celebrating. It can help keep us

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and our teams motivated. It can even be an inspiration when someone hears what you've accomplished, and they might think, "You know what? I'm going to do that next year."

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:21] Yes, it's nice to hear all sorts of winning going on. Not that every year doesn't bring its challenges, but you get to the end of the year, you're looking to the next one, and you do want to think about where you've been successful in that past year.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:33] So maybe we can share a few of our own wins, Jeff, and we can do some both personal and professional, perhaps.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:40] Sounds good. I know a big one for us here at Tagoras, the central parent company of Leading Learning, was that we hired an operations manager, something that we were sorely feeling the need for as we've grown as a company and had those growing pains. And one thing we really needed to do that an ops manager could take the reins on was documenting processes and procedures, and we did end up making a lot of progress on that this year.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:06] I feel like operations can be described a little bit the way we were describing reflection, where you know it's really important, but that idea of actually taking the time to document processes and procedures and get some of that buttoned up can feel like it's not as important as getting the stuff done. But, actually, just as reflection is really important and foundational, so are all of the processes and the operations of learning businesses in general. So I think that was, for us, a win to get that person on board and then to make some really good headway on processes, documenting those. Not that there's still not lots to do, but we're going to celebrate that as wins.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:48] Yes, plenty, plenty still to do. And one of the reasons that we wanted to do that, a key reason we wanted to do that, is we're continuing to grow and evolve as a company, as a learning business, and that meant introducing some new offerings, which we also did in 2023.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:02] One of those that comes to mind is the Learning Business Mastermind. We kicked that off with a small group of a dozen learning business leaders, but we've really had it in the back of our minds for quite a while now that it would be really helpful, we thought, to those in the learning business profession to be able to have a context in which they could connect with other peers on a substantive, meaningful level on a repeated time-based level. So not just a one-off you're meeting at a single conference, but something that's going to last at

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least a year and really begin to form some of those relationships and be able to share enough about what you're doing in your own organization so that others can potentially give you good input because they know enough about what you're doing, and then to also get to hear from a range of other learning business professionals. So we're definitely counting having kicked off our first Learning Business Mastermind as a win from 2023.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:00] Definitely. And this is an executive-level group, leaders of learning businesses. If you're hearing this, and that describes you, and you're interested, definitely drop us a line at leadinglearning@tagoras.com to find out more about where we're going with that. In addition to the mastermind, we launched a new online event, a new online conference, the Learning Business Summit. I'm thinking of this as the best of two worlds that we created in the past. One is our annual Live Review event, where we do demonstrations of learning platforms, and they are facilitated, very targeted for market-facing learning businesses. And then, before that, overlapping back in the past, we had an event called Learning • Technology • Design, which was about being excellent in the learning business, in your design, in your technology, just everything about being in the learning business. And we've synthesized those and focused them into an event that's really focused on being in the learning business and organized around three themes, the themes that run through all of our work—reach, revenue, and impact. And we'll be kicking that off. We've already got registrations for it. We've already got patrons for it. And we'll be hosting that in late January, early February 2024.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:13] Right. So we're counting it as a win for 2023 in the sense of we got it launched, but it won't actually take place until early 2024. And then, in terms of when I look back at the year past, I think one of the other areas that I'm going to call a win is that we've had an aha realization that we should focus much more clearly on learning businesses and that concept of learning business and really trying to build a sense of community, a sense of shared purpose in and among those serving that adult lifelong learning market. Whether they're offering continuing education, professional development, all of those organizations that are targeting those adult professional learners, they have a lot in common. And so there's a lot that can come with that clarity on our side around what we focus on, and you hear in the names of those two other wins we shared—Learning Business Mastermind, Learning Business Summit— already a greater clarity, a greater focus on that piece. And so, for us, I'm going to count that as a win because I think anytime you have something that helps you have greater clarity and greater focus in what you're doing, that's very helpful.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:22] One of the reasons we're doing that is to try to cultivate this sense of identity as learning business professionals. A lot of the folks who follow us work in, say, a trade

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or professional association, so they identify as an association professional. Or they may work in continuing education at a university, and they identify as a higher education professional. But there's this overlap. Same with commercial training firms. All of these types of entities are in the learning business, and it means something to be a person who is working in a market-facing business to serve adult lifelong learners, and we're trying to cultivate and solidify that sense of identity.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:00] So those are some of the wins that come to mind when we think about Tagoras and Leading Learning from 2023. Jeff, do you feel like sharing a personal win from 2023?

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:11] Sure. It took me almost the whole year to accomplish one of my biggest personal wins, which was to get into the studio and professionally record a record of my songs, something I've wanted to do for quite a long time. We did an earlier episode around some of the practice that went into this to polish and refine those songs, and I'll be out playing them live in places. But this was a bucket-list item for me—though not quite because it's something that I want to do going forward. It's my first, I hope it's not my last, record. But getting a record recorded. There's still some stuff to do to mix it and things like that. It'll actually be released in 2024, but the vast majority of it is done. I've recorded the guitar. I've recorded the vocals and looking forward to the final product now.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:59] I think with both the recording, you in the studio at that time, and then, as we were talking about with the summit, there's something about the nature of wins. Even when we look back and look at what's been accomplished, very often those things are ongoing. But it's still useful, I think, to pause and see what has been accomplished. Even if it's part of an ongoing effort, you can celebrate those little wins along the way. So congratulations, Jeff, for getting those songs recorded.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:27] Thank you. And, on your side, what's…

Celisa Steele: [00:09:30] Well, I don't think I have as clear of a win as you do, but I have a goal in the back of my mind. It came from a poet-friend who shared from a teacher that she had, and I unfortunately do not remember who that teacher was, but he said, "Send out at least 100 submissions." I'm a poet, and so my goal is to send out 100 submissions, with the idea that that's probably going to be 100 rejections, but at least you're doing the work to put it out there. And so I did not hit 100, at least yet, and I don't think I'm going to in the little remaining time in 2023.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:10:10] Yes, because in two weeks…

Celisa Steele: [00:10:12] But I got over…let me see…. I got over 50, so I'm at least halfway there. So, again, for me, I'm going to count that as a win, that it was at least doing the work of sending stuff out there. I can't control whether they say yes or no, but I can do the work to send them out there. And so, for me, this is a win in the sense of it's a reminder to control what you can control, and then don't worry about the rest. So hit send, and then whatever happens. I think it's also a reminder to me that it can be good to have these KPIs, to have a target in mind. At least having this idea of "Oh, I'm aiming for about 100" lets me know, well, I didn't hit 100, but I made substantial progress that way.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:55] Yes. As Teddy Roosevelt is so famous for saying, you got to get in the arena, and you'll see how it turns out once you get in there. But, if you don't get in there, nothing happens.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:04] We offer these wins from our side, not so much to say, "Ha, look at what we've done," but more, again, as trying to walk the walk, trying to be an avatar, and encouraging you to really pause and take some time to think about your own wins from 2023. Once you've thought about them, share them. That can be with your team. And then ask to hear wins from others that you work with. It can be, as we said, inspiring, and it can create a good sense of energy. There's a certain satisfaction that comes from having achieved something.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:38] Yes, and we'd love to hear about them too. You can comment on the show notes for this episode, or you can e-mail them to us at leadinglearning@tagoras.com, post them on LinkedIn—plenty of places to reach us. We always cover those throughout the episode.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:56] 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.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:32] So we've shared some more personal to us and our business reflections from 2023. But maybe we can widen the lens a little bit and look broader, bigger-picture at 2023.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:12:46] Yes. One of the things that kept evolving, continues to be a big issue, in 2023 is trust. Or, more accurately, the distrust. We highlighted distrust when looking back at 2022 in an episode that we recorded about this time a year ago, and it seems like an even stronger issue now that you've got deep fakes and AI taking off, all of this content being churned out that you don't really know who's behind it half the time or where it's really coming from. We recently did an interview with Melanie Deziel, who really focuses on this, particularly around brands. And, of course, we all have brands. We have to develop the trust in those brands. It's a really challenging issue these days.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:35] Another broader issue or current that lies under 2023 when I look back is the balance of face-to-face versus online interaction and face-to-face versus online learning as well. It seems like getting that balance right is very tricky. And it's definitely not a one-size-fits-all. It really seems to depend on the audience, the subject matter, and all sorts of other things going on—perhaps whether or not there's a new strain of a virus that's out there and causing havoc. But I know we've certainly heard a lot about this in the Learning Business Mastermind that we mentioned earlier. We have a range of views and experiences there. Some folks are having great success at returning to face-to-face. Their audience is really hungry to be back there and be able to shake hands and have those informal hallway conversations. But then we've also heard from others where trying to go back to face-to-face has not gotten the numbers that they would have been able to draw pre-pandemic.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:40] Yes, it's going to take years, I think, to really sort out this post-COVID world. But, of course, COVID just punctuated what we were already evolving towards anyway, with online learning really being mainstream at this point. Virtual events certainly had traction before COVID, got a lot more traction because of COVID. But the evolution and how people think about work now, how they think about work travel, how they think about networking at this point—different generations having grown up with different expectations around this. We're going to be sorting this one out for a long time, but we definitely felt it really strongly in 2023.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:20] On a personal note, I know we went back to some in-person attending, some in-person conferences in 2023. And, in many cases, that was wonderful. It was great to actually see some people that we hadn't seen in a couple years at that point, and so that was rewarding at some level. But there's also then the hassle of getting out of the office, getting on a plane, wondering if you're going to catch something while you're traveling or at the event, all of that. And we chose obviously to keep the Learning Business Summit as an online event, and, for us, we felt like it helps a bit with the accessibility. Not in the sense of people with disabilities

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but in the sense of who is able to have the budget and carve out the time that it might take to participate in an educational experience like that conference. It would be very different if you were trying to fly somewhere for three days.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:16] Yes. And I still hear a lot from folks about "You just can't have a great online experience"—that sort of thing, to which I say, "Hogwash." We've put a lot of time and effort into understanding how to do it well and learning how to deliver well. Every organization needs to do that. Even if you're mostly face-to-face, there are very few organizations where holding some form of online event shouldn't be part of your portfolio at this point. And learning how to do that really well and deliver a great experience, that's forever important going forward. That's not going to go away.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:50] These are just a couple of broader issues—this distrust issue and then the balancing of face-to-face and online. Those are two broader issues that we see when we look at 2023. We encourage you, dear listener, to take some time to reflect on the broader 2023 landscape and think about what impacted you and your learning business. And then what has the potential to continue to impact you in 2024 and beyond? Being aware of that broader context can be very useful and perhaps give you some insight into what you might do to better respond to your audience's needs.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:28] As we continue to look back on 2023, we thought it would be interesting and important to highlight some areas that we saw really tip and solidify in 2023, and these are areas where learning businesses are engaged in activities as a standard practice at this point. Let's talk about what those are because every learning business needs to be aware of them at this point and probably needs to be doing something with them.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:58] Before we get to those areas, I'll note a little bit more backstory on where this data is coming from. We ran an online survey in the fourth quarter of 2023. We got responses from 115 learning businesses that make up this data that we're about ready to share. Thank you, thank you, for anyone listening who took the time to respond to that survey. We are truly grateful for that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:22] Absolutely. A lot of people love to get this data, use this data. As you might expect or suspect, a much smaller fraction actually contributes to it. Please, please, if we send these surveys out, boy, we're so thankful if you do participate. It makes all the difference.

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Celisa Steele: [00:18:38] Based on those responses that we got, what we noticed is that, while we asked about 14 areas—we're going to talk more about the survey data in an upcoming episode, but, for now, what we wanted to share was that, out of the 14 areas that we asked about, we asked the respondents, "Are you already doing something in this area? Are you planning to begin doing something in this area in 2024? Or are you not planning to do anything in this area?" Basically we noticed that there are some things that used to be kind of fringe or bleeding-edge that have become standard practice. Over 50 percent of the respondents in the 2023 survey said that they are already active, already doing something in five of the 14 areas we asked about. And so we can just talk about what those are.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:26] The first one is combining online and face-to-face learning—70.4 percent are already doing something with combining online and face-to-face. I think COVID probably had to play a role here. It pushed everybody online for a time. Then face-to-face was put back on the table. But, as we were talking about earlier, learners had gotten used to the convenience and ease of learning online. But they missed gathering in person. And so it seems like this blending of online and face-to-face, this combination of online and face-to-face, has the potential to scratch all those itches and really provide convenience, effectiveness, and connection.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:10] Yes, and it helps learning take place over time and be reinforced in various ways, which we know in terms of learning being effective, for it to not be confined to a single event, whether that's online or off, but to be extended over time. And, if you can switch it up online and off in different ways that people are connecting, communicating, and absorbing the information and the experience with each other, you're going to be more effective with your learning experiences.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:36] The second area where we saw more than 50 percent of respondents already engaging is social learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:43] I think, again, COVID probably helped tip this one. During the lockdown days of the pandemic, a lot of people gained new appreciation for the value of being with and learning from and with others. A real craving developed for this. And some organizations learned how to do that well online. I think all organizations need to learn how to do that well online. We just talked about this blended approach, online/offline. Again, I think people wanted to come together again, but we're seeing now, as a standard practice, organizations are actively pursuing social learning in one form or another and making that a component of their learning experiences.

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Celisa Steele: [00:21:26] And social learning is really at the heart of the Learning Business Mastermind that we mentioned earlier. That is predicated on this idea of peers having value to share with one another and being able to help one another improve and learn. We're very bought into and committed to this idea of the importance, the value, and the effectiveness of social learning, peer-to-peer learning, cohort-based learning—all things under that umbrella.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:52] Definitely. I think with social learning, all of this stuff, you have to learn how to do it well, and I think being thoughtful about social learning, helping to structure it, to facilitate it, to scaffold it—all of those things help to make it much more effective. Organizations are doing it. It's a standard practice now, as we're saying. How do we keep getting better and better at it?

Celisa Steele: [00:22:15] The third area where more than 50 percent are engaged is around analyzing and using data to inform product decisions. This could be whether to develop a new product or how to improve an existing product. So 57 percent are doing something in that area, which is very heartening. I mean that's sort of…

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:35] Thankfully, this one is finally tipped, yes.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:37] And maybe it's disheartening that it's only 57 percent, but, to our mind, it's just good practice. We really have to be careful to not assume that we know our learners' motivations and needs. And, even if we do know them, we don't want to assume that they don't change over time. So this is where data really comes in to make sure we aren't making assumptions. And then we need to gather new data, analyze new data periodically so that we are keeping up with an accurate view of our marketplace and our learners and their needs.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:09] And, to be sure, we have a very strong bias on this one because a large amount of the consulting work we do, as Tagoras, is really around market assessment and getting this data and analyzing this data, helping organizations use that to make good decisions about the products that they're going to create, the products that they need to revitalize, or whatever the case might be. But, boy, whether you work with a consultant or not, even if you do work with a consultant, you need this skill internally. You need first of all the practice of gathering meaningful data, but then having some capacity, some capabilities to analyze that data and use it meaningfully to make decisions.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:47] Microlearning was the fourth area, with 54.5 percent of respondents saying they're doing something with microlearning. Adult learners, adults in general, tend to be

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very busy. Most of us aren't spending whole days at a time on learning. And so, if we can learn something meaningful and valuable in a little 10-minute, 15-minute block that we can carve out of our day, then that's a huge win. Microlearning right now fits so well with the realities of current demands on most people's schedules. We also know from a learning science standpoint that microlearning is going to make it more likely that it's the kind of thing you can revisit. If you can revisit over time, that's going to help with this idea of spaced learning and repetition, which is going to help to build true learning in something that is maintained and held on to over time.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:45] I haven't read a lot or heard much discussion about this, but it seems like microlearning is going to fit so well into what's now happening with generative AI. ChatGPT has been so useful because a big part of the way people like to learn is that they've got these questions. They want to ask these questions, and then they want to get some answers and some ways to address whatever it is—that challenge or that opportunity—in the moment. And sometimes that's just a snippet of text that comes back and says, "Here's the answer to what you just asked about." But other times they need something a little more in-depth and for microlearning to be what's available in those interactions. You're asking ChatGPT about something, and here's a 10-minute content module to address that. I would definitely be thinking about that as a learning business right now—how you fit into that flow with your microlearning.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:34] Then the last area where over 50 percent of respondents are already active is in virtual conferences. I think we've already touched on this, that COVID probably had a hand in tipping this into an area where the majority are doing something. But people have gotten used to that convenience, and so this probably isn't likely to go away even now that face-to-face is back on the table. There is a place, a use, and a good purpose for virtual conferences/online conferences, so we're seeing a majority doing that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:09] They're doing it, but, anecdotally, I'm hearing a lot of organizations that are dialing back on it. They're dropping it now that they don't have to do it. Again, I think that is a mistake. It doesn't mean that your annual event has to be a virtual conference, but niche conferences that get—to go back to that accessibility question that you raised, Celisa, there's a huge portion of most organizations' audiences that aren't ever going to show up at those face-to-face events. They can't afford it. They don't like the hassle of it. Whatever it is. But to do good, solid, niche-type online conferences, again, it should be a part of every learning business's portfolio at this point.

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Celisa Steele: [00:26:47] We'll offer a quick benchmarking exercise here. Stop and think how many of these five areas is your organization active in. And so it can be anywhere between 0 and 5, and, once you have that number, make sure that you have a good reason if you're not doing one of these things. These are becoming expected. They're becoming something that learners are likely to think that they can get from you. So, if you're not doing something in one of these areas, make sure you understand why. Maybe you do have a legitimate reason to not be active in that area. Or maybe it's something you need to be thinking about for 2024 and beyond.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:29] Yes, and seriously, do ask that because we're not saying by this, "Oh, you have to rush out and start doing microlearning, social learning, and virtual conferences right away if you're not doing them." But you should be seriously looking at it and understanding whether you should be doing them, where they might fit. And, in some cases, they may not. It's possible that these don't fit in terms of standard practices for your learning businesses, but make sure you know what that reason is if you're going to make the decision not to do it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:03] Make time to reflect on the past, take stock, celebrate progress and accomplishments, and then set goals and intentions for the future. Do this for yourself and for your learning business. Doing so will help you lay the foundation for a successful 2024 for you and your team.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:21] At leadinglearning.com/episode391, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast if you're not already subscribed.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:30] And we'd be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Celisa and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:46] 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/episode391, you'll find links to connect with us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:01] 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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