



Preparing for 2024

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 392

Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] In addition to asking yourself about your priorities for the year ahead, also ask if your priorities are clear throughout your learning business? Is everyone on the team aware of and crystal-clear on your priorities for the year ahead?

Celisa Steele: [00:00:19] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:20] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:28] Welcome to episode 392 of the Leading Learning Podcast, in which we'll focus on what 2024 may hold for learning businesses. We're thinking of this episode as a companion to episode 391, in which we reflected back on 2023. Now we'll look ahead.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:47] January is, of course, the time for that looking back and looking forward. January is named after Janus, the Roman god with two faces—one set of eyes looking to the past, the other set looking ahead to the future. Hopefully, dear listener, you've already been strategizing and preparing for the year ahead, but we hope our conversation will be further encouragement to you to be thoughtful about your priorities for 2024.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:13] To help us look at the year ahead, we'll draw on data we collected via an online survey in the fourth quarter of 2023. We received qualifying responses from 115 organizations, learning businesses of all types—that is, organizations that sell continuing education, professional development, and other types of lifelong learning experiences to adult learners. Respondents included charitable or philanthropic organizations, educational institutions, for-profit businesses, and associations, which were the largest segment of respondents.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:48] We asked survey respondents to let us know which of 14 areas they are already pursuing, planning to pursue in 2024, or not planning to pursue. So those three answer choices for 14 areas, and those 14 areas are:

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1. Creation of learning experiences that combine online elements with face-to-face elements
2. Implementation of technologies that leverage artificial intelligence to support or enhance learning
3. Microlearning opportunities
4. Providing a personalized learning experience
5. Creation of social, peer-to-peer, or cohort-based learning experiences
6. The use of virtual reality or augmented reality to provide new learning experiences or enhance existing experiences
7. The use of virtual conferences (And we defined a virtual conference as an online event similar to the traditional face-to-face conference, not just a single Webinar.)

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:51] The other areas are:

8. New or alternative approaches to credentialing, including certificate programs, microcredentials, and digital badges
9. Aligning offerings with specific career or job paths relevant to learners—for example, through a competency model, learning pathways, or targeted curricula
10. Integration of educational offerings into the learning and development programs of employers in a field or industry or into general workforce development needs
11. Development of strategies or tactics to help combat declining enrollments, downward price pressure, or “commoditization” of educational offerings
12. Increased efforts to gather and analyze data to inform new product decisions or improve existing products
13. Increased efforts to gather and analyze data that demonstrates the impact or effectiveness of the learning experiences offered
14. Implementation of methods to ensure that learning is retained and applied over time

Celisa Steele: [00:04:02] So, listener, what’s top of the list for your learning business to tackle this year? What are your priorities? It might be something that you heard in that list of 14 areas that we mentioned, or it might be something else. And I will note, because I know it’s probably hard to keep all 14 of those in mind, if you’re just listening, but you can find a list of those areas in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode392. Before we get to some data from the survey on those 14 areas, you might want to pause—literally hit Pause on the podcast—and think about your own priorities and which of these, if any, are on your radar and which you’re likely to act on in the coming year. In addition to asking yourself about your priorities for the year ahead, also ask if your priorities are clear throughout your learning business? Is everyone on the team aware of and crystal-clear on your priorities for the year ahead?

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Jeff Cobb: [00:05:07] 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're looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:38] Now that you've hopefully paused and done a little thinking on your own, we're going to share the top four areas from the survey results. These are the four areas that have more than a third of respondents saying they plan to begin pursuing these in 2024. Now, top of the list is probably not a surprise. It is what we would probably have all guessed if we had to: implementation of technologies that leverage artificial intelligence to support or enhance learning. So 44.3 percent are planning to focus on that in 2024, and 27.4 percent are already working on it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:21] This is the area where we saw the largest change in planning to this year versus planning to last year—a 15.7-point increase. It's not surprising that AI has jumped higher in people's plans. AI seems to be everywhere at this point. What's probably more interesting is the fact that 28.3 percent aren't focused on AI and don't plan to in the year ahead. We're thinking that only beginning to focus on AI in 2025 or later could be a little bit late.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:56] Yes, and I feel like we should probably spend a little bit of extra time on this area because of AI's potential to color and impact so much of what learning businesses do and also the broader world in which we are all living, working, and learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:15] One of the ways we talked about this in a Webinar we did on the topic to f cap the year was referring to AI or thinking of AI more as infrastructure. This is an idea that comes from Dr. Philippa Hardman, who's one of the leading thinkers about AI in education right now. She tends to go by Dr. Phil, if I understand correctly, but she did a Substack post in November, writing about AI as infrastructure. Many people see AI as a powerful tool or technology, but it's really more than that. To quote what Phil says, "It's an infrastructural development with fundamental implications for how humans live, work, and learn."

Celisa Steele: [00:08:02] In that Substack post, she's making the point that AI is less like a calculator, which is a tool, and it's more like electricity, which is an infrastructure. So AI is really foundational and then enables and supports many technologies and tools. By adopting this

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view of AI as infrastructure, then the discussion about AI and how we can use it opens up. It gives us two ways to look at AI. There can be artificial intelligence for automating human capability, and then there can be AI for augmenting human capability. AI for automation means that artificial intelligence is taking over a task that was previously done by a human. That's where, instead of someone having to manually add up those numbers, we get to use the calculator.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:56] I think that's the one that gets most people worried about AI is going to take over. It's going to automate all these jobs that human beings used to do. We're going to have our robot overlords here in the not-too-distant future. I don't want to dismiss those sorts of fears out of hand. AI is very powerful. But it goes beyond just automation in what's possible, and so the second area is AI for augmentation, which means it's assisting a human being in freeing up mental bandwidth so that they can prioritize high-value work. In this case, AI is enhancing a human's ability, and this is, again, AI as electricity. You can think about all the ways that electricity has made individual humans and humans as a species much more effective and powerful than was ever the case in the past.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:52] Our takeaway with this point is simply that you really should be thinking about AI and hopefully thinking about it as infrastructure, that potential to both help with automation and to also augment what you're already doing as a learning business. That idea, especially that idea of AI as infrastructure, is going to, in all likelihood, really impact almost every aspect of what we all are doing in the year ahead. It'll be clearer in some ways, and it'll be a little harder to tease out in other areas, but AI is having a fundamental impact on how we live, work, and learn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:36] Definitely. It's already here. I used to often say about social media, which I feel was the last big tech wave to wash over us, that, in many cases, we were already soaking in it—for those who are old enough to remember the old Palmolive commercials with Madge—where basically it's just all around us already, and we're not even aware of it. That's already happening with AI. Start to be conscious of, okay, then how does that play out in automation? How does that play out in augmentation? How are we going to really harness this in our learning business in 2024? That should be a top-of-mind question, I think, for every learning business leader right now.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:24] We'll jump back to the survey data to share the other top three areas. The next highest area is aligning offerings with specific career or job paths relevant to learners.

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That could be through a competency model, learning pathways, or a targeted curriculum—those are all examples we gave. And 41.3 percent are planning to focus on that in 2024.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:47] And, anecdotally, we're seeing a lot more of this. We're doing a lot more work with clients around this. With there being so much competition for attention from other providers of learning experiences, really being able to offer experiences that do clearly relate to specific careers, specific jobs, and being able to show learners that the path—how that works, how you're going to help them do that—is a way to stand out and deliver higher value these days with your learning offerings. So I would expect this one to continue to evolve, and we've talked about things that have become standard practice in another episode, in the companion to this episode. I see this one becoming a standard practice in the relatively near future.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:37] The next area is implementation of methods to ensure that learning is retained and applied over time, and 37.4 percent of respondents are planning to focus there in 2024. This is very heartening to us. It really speaks to what we see as the core mission of learning businesses—to provide learning products and services that make a difference, that move the needle, and aren't just check-the-box transactions that don't really have any lasting impact on the learner, the organization the learner works in, or the people that the learner serves. Very heartened to see that this is going to be an area of focus for 37.4 percent of respondents.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:20] Yes. Of course, our mantras or our themes here at Leading Learning and at Tagoras are reach, revenue, and impact, and this is very much the impact part of the equation. And it's by actually achieving impact, by delivering learning effectiveness—that really is your product if you're a learning business, to deliver that learning effectiveness—that's going to drive greater reach, that's going to drive greater revenue. So, in some ways, this is the root of it all.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:45] Then the last area where over a third of respondents are planning to focus efforts in 2024, that is increased efforts to gather and analyze data to inform new product decisions or improve existing products. We talked about this a little bit in the companion episode because it has tipped into being standard practice. Even more people are going to begin doing it in the year ahead. Again, this, to us, makes a ton of sense, to make sure that you are building products that really are going to respond to market needs, they're going to have that impact that you were just mentioning, Jeff. One great way to do that is to make sure that you actually have data, that you're not just operating on gut or instinct or somebody's opinion, but

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you really have data to back up, okay, which products make sense, or how can we improve the products we have out there.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:38] We want to take a step away from the data, but we want to offer two takeaways, informed by the data too, but it's not just reporting, you know....

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:48] We're going to synthesize.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:49] Yes, we're going to move up Bloom's Taxonomy a little bit to a higher level and, instead of just reporting the data, offer two takeaways and then unpack them. The first one is "Pave the path for your learners." You were beginning to talk about that, Jeff, earlier when we shared a little bit of data around the idea of aligning offerings with specific career or job paths. But we also asked about two other areas that, in our minds, tie—or potentially tie—to that idea of pathways. One of those areas is new or alternative approaches to credentialing—that could be certificate programs, microcredentials, digital badges. The other area was integration of educational offerings into the learning and development programs of employers in the field or industry that you serve, or into general workforce development needs. If you take those three together—the paths (career or job paths), alternative credentials, and then satisfying an employer need or general workforce development—for us, there's a Venn diagram where you have those three circles, and, right in the middle, you get something a bit magical where they all overlap.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:06] Yes, it really is a sweet spot, and we'd encourage you to actually try to visualize those Venn diagrams. Or, maybe once you're in a position, if you can pause right now, you can draw them, or if you're in a position later to draw them and think about those overlaps. Because, when you've got offerings that align to that career path or specific job paths, you're able to offer a credential around it that is seen as having some validity in the marketplace, and you're really able to do that in a way that integrates into the programs and the needs of the employers in your field, industry, or into those general workforce development needs, that's an incredibly valuable combination for a learner to be able to come to you, for employers to be able to look to you for. And, again, in a marketplace where the competition is high for learners' attention, for their wallets, for employers' wallets, being able to deliver that kind of value can really stand you out as a learning business serving your particular field or industry.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:16] So that's the first takeaway, "Pave the path for your learners." The second takeaway is "Plan for RISC." And we're having a little fun here because RISC is actually spelled R-I-S-C in our version, but it sounds just like the R-I-S-K word. The idea here is that our

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kind of RISC is a little bit of an antidote to the R-I-S-K risk. And RISC, for us, stands for Rapid Intelligence with Strategic Confidence.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:49] In 2024, it seems like we're bound to be in for a lot more uncertainty and maybe upheaval. We've got so many things going on in the world right now—climate change, international conflicts, the 2024 US presidential election (who knows how that's going to turn out?), higher ed institutions that are trying to figure out how to survive in a culture that seems more and more skeptical of the value of a college degree, not to mention all the fire they're coming under trying to navigate some of those other complexities that I just referenced. Throw AI into all of that, boy, there's just so much going on right now to try to figure out, and you have to have an approach for doing that.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:36] To help cut through the noise, we think that you need to experiment because, in this time of uncertainty, it's not necessarily going to be crystal-clear what is going to work, what is going to help you reach your learners, get their attention, convince them that you are trustworthy, and that they should spend their time, money, and energy learning with you. And so you're going to need to experiment to figure out what works. You're going to have to have some hypotheses and design some tests. You're going to need to try them out. And you're going to need to learn from those tests so that, then, you can put into action, at larger scale, what you've learned from those tests.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:17] And the reason we think this is acronym-worthy, R-I-S-C (Rapid Intelligence with Strategic Confidence), is that it shouldn't just be an off-the-cuff or one-off thing that you're doing randomly throughout the year. This needs to be institutionalized. This needs to become part of your operations, part of your culture, not just a solo or isolated activity. And, because it needs to be that, someone needs to be accountable for it. Someone needs to be responsible for making sure you're doing it, making that part of how you operate as a learning business in 2024, having those experiments that give you that rapid intelligence and inform your strategic confidence is going to be essential.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:04] We encourage you to pause and think about what will you try in 2024? What plans do you have to experiment? How will you try out new things? Are you going to do some A/B testing? Potentially pilot a course? Are you going to play around with prompt engineering? It could, of course, be a multitude of things, but get clear on what you are going to try and what you hope to learn from that so you can have that clear hypothesis to go out, test, try, plan for those experiments in the year ahead, and then make sure that you learn from and implement what you learn based on the results of those tests.

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Celisa Steele: [00:20:49] So that's our look at the year ahead. At leadinglearning.com/episode392, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. If you haven't yet, please do subscribe.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:01] Yes, please do, as those subscription numbers give us some visibility into the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:08] 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. Jeff and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:22] And 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/episode392, you'll find links to connect with us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:39] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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