Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] What does a world that learns better look like? Learning businesses have an opportunity and a responsibility to help envision and realize that world.

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

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:16] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:24] What does a world that learns better look like to you? I was recently interviewed by the IACET podcast, and that was a question I was asked that I personally found truly interesting.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:37] Yes, I think it's an intriguing question too, and it shows us the power of a good question. It's essentially about the future of learning, but I think the framing takes me a slightly different direction than a question about "the future of learning," phrased that way, might take me. This feels a little more philosophical and a little less futurist.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:00] We do like a little philosophy here at the Leading Learning Podcast, so we want to focus today's episode on that question: "What does a world that learns better look like?" And we're calling the episode "Building a World That Learns Better" because Celisa and I and those of you listening, we all have a role to play, a contribution to make in bringing about this world that learns better.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:25] Of course, we think this is an excellent question for you to consider on your own and with your team. What does a world that learns better look like? It's the kind of question that can get you out of the usual approaches, the usual constraints, and free you to imagine and envision.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:01:45] I think anybody who knows us well knows that we're probably going to kick this off by defining our terms. So let's break that question down and start with what does it mean to "learn better"?

Celisa Steele: [00:02:00] For me, "better" suggests learning both more efficiently and more effectively. If you were going to learn more effectively, that emphasizes to me the quality—the quality of learning outcomes, the quality of the learning experience itself. Then learning more efficiently focuses on optimizing the processes and the resources that are involved in learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:26] Both of those are important. You don't want to optimize learning if it's not very effective. And, not to cast stones, but sometimes it does seem like that's what happens in learning businesses. How can we cut hours of effort off the time it takes us to produce one hour of e-learning? But then there's no real thought to how effective that e-learning is (or isn't)?

Celisa Steele: [00:02:52] If you do have effective learning, then optimizing is important. If your learning business can create additional highly effective learning experiences because you're focused on efficiency, then that's hugely impactful and important. If a learner can get the skills and knowledge that she needs faster because you've optimized the content—you pruned it ruthlessly to the essential—then that's also very valuable in our time-poor society.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:21] So that's talking about more efficiently and more effectively. But what does learning that is more effective and more efficient actually entail? What's going to make it more effective and more efficient?

Celisa Steele: [00:03:35] We came up with six ideas that make learning more efficient and effective that we'll touch on. You might want to think of others and think about what does it mean to you for learning to be more effective and efficient? But one of the first things that came to mind for us was application because unapplied (meaning unused) skills and knowledge aren't particularly valuable—they aren't particularly valuable to the learner; they aren't particularly valuable to the learner's employer; they're not particularly valuable to society. There needs to be that application piece; the skills and knowledge need to be applied.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:15] Then there's relevance, which is something we hear a lot about, particularly when that applies to adult learners. You need the experience, the learning to be relevant to that learner. Personalization is a part of this—the more specific and more personalized, the more likely the learning experience is to be relevant and, of course, the more likely it is to be applied. Also, if an experience is personalized, tailored, then there's no excess, which saves time and

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mental energy (reducing cognitive load). Going back to more efficiently and effectively, relevance helps to drive that.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:54] Another thing that's wrapped up in efficient and effective learning is retention. This is what is going to allow learners to apply skills and knowledge over time. They have to be able to retain that information in order to be able to apply it and to be able to call on it in that moment of need. So retention is another key part, in our minds, to effectiveness and efficiency.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:22] Application, relevance, retention, and then continuous is another element of effectiveness and efficiency for us. We view learning as truly lifelong. It's a process, not an event. We've talked about that many, many times before. I'm sure we will talk about it many, many times again. As we apply over time, we get better, hopefully.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:46] Another aspect of efficiency and effectiveness is accessibility. Here we're thinking about learning that's accessible regardless of factors like socio-economic status, geographic location, physical ability, schedule realities. You can probably think of some others to fill in here. But the idea is that, for learning to be effective and efficient, it really has to be accessible.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:14] The list we're providing right now, we're not saying this is exhaustive, but the last element of that effective and efficient learning that we'll mention is that it's ethical. Learners understand the implications of knowledge and skills and then use them responsibly for the betterment of society. Those creating learning do it in ways that consider things like environmental impact, airfare, and the power that computer servers can take up. They consider things like human resources—the employees at convention centers or hotels in your room block. You take into account the whole context in which learning is happening and helping the learning both to be an ethical experience and to hopefully promote ethical experiences.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:08] And to be applied ethically.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:09] And to be applied ethically.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:09] There are many facets to the ethics aspect of this. Those are six things that we had in mind when thinking about learning being more effective and more efficient—i.e., learning being better. We're talking about application, relevance, retention, the idea that it is a continuous process, the idea that accessibility is there, and that ethics are taken into

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consideration, on the side of the learner consuming the product, also the learning business creating and providing that product, and then how it's applied broadly as well. In our minds, a world that learns better would take those six things into account.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:56] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them to understand market realities and potential, to connect better with existing customers and find new ones, and to make smart investment decisions around product development and portfolio management. Drawing on our expertise in lifelong learning, market assessment, and strategy formulation, we can help you achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact. Learn more at tagoras.com/more.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:34] That points at how we think about learning, which is more broadly than learning often gets thought about, often gets talked about. We've discussed this before, that learning is broader than education. It's not just about courses, classes, or conferences. Again, it's a process, not just an event—that's a big part of the learning being better, but also just having what we consider a better perspective on learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:06] It also points to the fact that what might be needed to support learning may not be one of those narrowly defined forms of education—a course, a conference, a class. But what might be needed is mentoring, job aids, or simply examples of how to do something or examples of policies and procedures. When you have that focus on learning, which goes back to the application that we mentioned earlier, you have to think much more broadly about learning and consider all the options that might help you help learners do what they need to do better.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:48] This goes beyond professional learning too, particularly in our world—the world of learning businesses—we tend to think about professional learning, career-oriented learning. But, even in those professional contexts, you need to bring a much wider lens to bear on learning. Even professional learning happens in a larger context. People in any learning situation need to hold themselves much more fully open to learning than often seems to be the case when you look at what's going on in our world. That does apply professionally—we all have to be aware of what's changing in our chosen profession and be prepared to learn and adapt. But it does also apply more broadly to how we learn in life in general.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:40] A key to all of this is this idea that we do have one life, and so, sure, we have what we're doing professionally, but there's really a very thin wall, if any wall, between

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what we're doing professionally and what we're doing personally and what we learn in some arena that might not "apply" directly to our professional life. There still may be learning to be taken from that, and that does actually help us in how we perform our jobs and do them better. We try not to get particularly political on the Leading Learning Podcast, but, regardless of your political perspective, it seems pretty clear that we're living in a time where there are a lot of factions, a lot of division, a lot of groups who feel like their group has the answer.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:31] Yes, it definitely seems to be a lot of that out there. But no one has the answers when it comes right down to it. We all have to be continually learning together to figure out collectively what works. This is one of the reasons why learning is so important. It's why the whole concept of a world that learns better is so important.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:54] Right. Because I think a world that learns better isn't defined by learning about particular topics or subjects. It's about critical thinking and broadly being able to go out in search of knowledge, which involves a certain level of open-mindedness and being willing to explore and be swayed and review data and see where you land and all of that. In a world that learns better, all of that is possible, and that hopefully then keeps us all a little bit more open to what we might decide to do and what we might believe is "true" (or not true).

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:33] Yes. We said at the beginning we're taking a philosophical perspective here. Philosophy is literally the love of knowledge. Some would say it's the love of truth. It's the seeking of truth, which is what learning fundamentally should be about. To a large extent, that sort of perspective on learning can probably only be fostered when we're young, which points to why early childhood education is so important. K-12 is so important. But I believe we both share this view that organizations that serve adult lifelong learners do have both an opportunity and, I'd argue, a responsibility to foster greater openness to learning among the people they serve.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:21] I do believe that as well. I do agree with that. I think that we both also believe that, ultimately, the responsibility really is primarily the learners.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:32] True enough, yes.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:33] We've talked about, written about the learners' responsibility in places before. We don't want to suggest that a learning business can do this on their own. The responsibility for learning is primarily on the learners' part. But we can do more as learning businesses, or we can do, certainly, some things, as learning businesses, to reinforce that idea of

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ownership, that the individuals need to be empowered and act empowered in their own learning. Essentially, that's a deep sense of engagement on the learners' part—they're invested in making sure that learning happens. They're there to make sure that they get that from any learning experience that they're going to spend their time in. We need to give them that sense of ownership, that sense of engagement—foster that sense of engagement—and then do what we can to support learners.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:30] Yes. When you talk about something like a culture of learning, I think a culture of learning is where that is the implicit and the explicit message of learning among the group of people that you're serving. And you're right—we can't force people to learn. We can't just say, "Be motivated," and they're going to be motivated, or "Be engaged," and they're going to be engaged. But we can strive as learning businesses, as teachers and facilitators, to try to establish a context that helps to elicit the motivation, that helps to elicit the engagement that hopefully is there in the learners who, as we've said, do ultimately have to take responsibility themselves because we can't force anybody to learn—people have to step up to their learning in the end.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:22] It's essentially about mindset. We're trying to prime learners for that sense of ownership, that sense of profound engagement. And that's where we, as learning businesses, can focus our efforts and hopefully then set those learners up for success.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:45] We're in a time right now where a lot of adaptation is required, both on the part of learners and on the [part of the] learning businesses and the subject matter experts and teachers who serve them. We've seen the pace of change be incredible over recent decades. The world has always changed, and everybody thinks they're living in the times that've had the most change. But the amount of change that's related to knowledge, to cognition, to the human mind has been so significant in the past two to three decades and then, in the past few years, with what has begun to become much more apparent with artificial intelligence—particularly generative artificial intelligence. It reminds us of the role of learning generally. If you're paying attention, you have to start thinking about where does human learning now fit in relationship to machine learning and to artificial forms of intelligence going forward?

Celisa Steele: [00:16:48] This reminds me of the comment I made at the beginning around the fact that sometimes what's needed to support learning isn't a course or a class. It might be that job aid, an example, or a mentor. When we look at this human-versus-technology, human-and-technology balance, the same interplay is at work. There's a certain amount that we as humans do have to learn, that we do need to be able to retain and apply. But one way we can be smart

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learners, part of one way we can learn better is by leveraging technology appropriately. I'm thinking fairly broadly of technology—certainly generative AI, yes, falls under that technology umbrella. But even the technology of having that process that you can refer to or that job aid, that can also fall under that broad umbrella of technology. So, thinking through, "What is it that I actually need to have in my brain, and what is it that I can perhaps leverage through outside tools? I can still be able to do what I need to do, but I don't necessarily have to have it memorized in order to be able to use it effectively."

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:05] I feel like we've talked about this concept of a world that learns better in two main ways. One is around the performance of learning—that efficiency and that effectiveness. How do we become better learners? But then, as we've just been discussing, there's this mindset aspect to it—this openness to learning, this curiosity about learning, this realization that how learning happens, the need for learning. The ways we're going to learn are changing and are changing rapidly—and having an awareness of that and embracing it. As we've already said, all of us feeling a responsibility to be effective learners going forward.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:50] Part of that in this evolving world is knowing what you do need to learn and what you don't need to learn. There's a little bit around the subjects and the topics there. One example of that is something like prompt engineering. When ChatGPT first hit the scene, in those few months after that, there was a ton of content being produced around how to write effective prompts. That was a big focus and became this key skill that people suddenly seemed to need: how to write a good prompt for generative AI. And yet generative AI continues to evolve, so the need for prompt engineering is probably on the decline.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:40] I'm thinking of what Ethan Mollick has said—I know in an interview with Ezra Klein, maybe in other places—but this idea that generative AI is most likely going to get smart enough to understand what you want from it. This need to carefully craft a prompt is going to go away. That's going to have been a very short-lived skill. That's one small example that points to, in our world, where there's so much that can be learned, part of what the learner has to do and part of what a learning business can help support a learner in doing is choosing which areas don't make sense to focus time and attention on.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:18] Maybe we should wrap this up with some learning assignments to have listeners take away and do some of their own work around this question.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:29] We encourage you to take time to reflect on that question that was central to this episode: "What does a world that learns better look like for you?" Then, if you

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have a team or if you have colleagues who are involved in this field as well, discuss it with them.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:50] Walk up to somebody in the hallway and ask, "What does a world that learns better look like?" They'll probably have a quizzical look on their face at first, but I bet you'll engage them pretty quickly. And then be thinking about—for you, for the work you're doing—how can you help create that world that learns better?

Celisa Steele: [00:21:08] Yes. Once you have that vision of what a world that learns better looks like, how can you help create that? And what would it look like if you focused your learning business on helping to create that world learn better? What would you do? Maybe what you're already doing, maybe some aspects of it, maybe some new things. What would you stop doing? If you really took that lens of creating a world that learns better, what would that tell you about the activities that you do in your learning business?

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:52] What does a world that learns better look like? Learning businesses have an opportunity and a responsibility to help envision and realize that world.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:03] At leadinglearning.com/episode412, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. If you haven't yet subscribed, please do.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:14] 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 others search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:30] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one exchange with a colleague, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode412, you'll find links to connect with us on LinkedIn, X, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:46] 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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