



## The Inquiring Mind, Part II

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 419

Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] *The Inquiring Mind* by Cyril Houle was written in 1961, but it's a foundational text that can still provide learning businesses with a better understanding of the motivations of the learners they aim to serve.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:18] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:26] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:27] In our Learning Business Maturity Model, marketing is one of the five fundamental domains learning businesses need to work on and in to mature and be successful.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:37] To help you in understanding your market, we offer in this episode, number 419, the second part of our book report on *The Inquiring Mind: A Study of the Adult Who Continues to Learn* by Cyril Houle.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:52] In episode 418, we covered the first chapter of the book along with some background on Cyril Houle. That first chapter was called "Two Educations," and, in that chapter, he (Houle) talks about three subgroups, or categories, of lifelong learners: the goal-oriented, the activity-oriented, and the learning-oriented. I'll let that suffice for the brief recap for this episode, but you'll find a link to that previous episode in the show notes for this episode at [leadinglearning.com/episode419](http://leadinglearning.com/episode419).

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:26] In this episode, we're going to look at the other two chapters in the book, and we'll repeat what we said in the last episode: It's a modest volume, it's a slim book, and it's made up of these three chapters. And this second chapter is titled "Step to the Music."

Celisa Steele: [00:01:44] That title comes from the opening epigraph of the chapter, which is from Thoreau: "If a man does not keep pace with his companions, perhaps it is because he hears a different drummer. Let him step to the music which he hears, however measured or far away." I will say that, as a side note, *The Inquiring Mind* is chocked full of quotations from other

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books. Each of those three chapters starts with an epigraph that is the source of the chapter title, and I will say that all of the quotes, the use of those epigraphs, make me heavily suspect that Houle was a learning-oriented lifelong learner because he does note that they tend to be avid readers.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:25] I feel certain that he was. We noted in the last episode that we dedicated the episode to Cyril Houle and to David Houle, his son. I know David is also probably one of those learning-oriented lifelong learners, somebody who seeks knowledge for the sake of knowledge, at least when it comes to understanding the world, understanding lifelong learning, those sorts of things. There're probably areas in which both of them are more goal-oriented or activity-oriented. We've talked about how that can switch up some, but, on the whole, I think they were probably very learning-oriented.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:57] And so, in this chapter, "Step to the Music," Cyril Houle digs into the motivations that define those three categories of learners and looks at how those learners tend to see both themselves and other lifelong learners. The goal-oriented learners tend to feel pretty comfortable and confident in their approach because it tends to fit with our society and our economy, which tend to be pretty goal-oriented. They tend to see "adult education as a way to solve problems or pursue particular interests." And so they really identify as going after some goal, and they also tend to attribute the same kinds of motives to other learners. They think other learners are also out there trying to achieve some goal. In fact, this group of goal-oriented tends to be fairly impatient with anybody who doesn't describe why they're learning as being related to a goal. They don't get this idea of "Oh, I'm just reading a book to read a book." Why are you reading that book? What do you hope to do once you've finished the book? They're very application-focused, very practical-focused.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:07] These are the people who e-mail us and want to know what the agenda is for whatever it is that we're offering. Because I think they're probably thinking about what are their goals, and is this agenda going to help them meet their goals or not? So that's the goal-oriented group.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:21] And then there's the activity-oriented group. People may be a little less willing to own up to that, just depending on how they're thinking about activity and what seems safe or acceptable. In some cases, they may be seeking out these learning activity-type environments simply because they're lonely, or they're looking for friends or looking for a spouse or significant other. It may not be the type of thing that everybody wants to put out there. But, for the most part, when they're asked directly about their motives, those activity-

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oriented people prefer to say things which, when you take them at face value, would actually put them in one of the other categories.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:01] I think it gets back to what our society, what our economy tends to value. It tends to understand, or it's okay to be going after something to achieve, a goal. And so rather than saying, "Oh, I'm going to this conference for companionship," or "I'm going to this salsa class to find a spouse," they'll say, "Oh, well, I'm trying to learn how to dance," which, again, at face value, would put them more in that goal-oriented category. But it comes down to whether or not it's safe for them to admit it. I think that also does apply to the check-the-box learners that we also talked about that can fall under this activity orientation. Even if that's all they're there for—just to check the box and get whatever the certificate is at the end—they might not always feel comfortable saying that. They might give lip service to having some goal or some appreciation for the particular subject matter and what it might help them do, but really they're there just to check the box.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:59] I think that's why you hear a term like "networking" so often because networking feels goal-oriented. It sounds very pragmatic and businesslike. It doesn't say, "I'm going there just because I want the social atmosphere," basically, which I think your average person who values networking is looking for more than just social interaction. But networking makes it feel more goal-oriented, more practical.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:20] So those are the first two categories. That third category, of learning-oriented lifelong learners, Houle says that they have "two distinct self-conceptions. Most have long been aware of their own preoccupation with learning (they can cite illustrations from their childhood to prove it), and they recognize that they are different from most other people in this respect. But a few of the learning-oriented insisted"—this is, again, based on the 22 interviews that Houle and colleagues did—"that they are not continuing learners at all and that education is merely their way of having fun."

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:54] I love that portion of this group. Yes, it's just this is who they are, this is what they do, this is how they enjoy life, and they aren't thinking of it as learning even though clearly it's very oriented towards learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:07] In that bit that I just quoted, there is that phrase, they are "different from most others in this respect," meaning their preoccupation with learning. And Houle really gives some emphasis to that and spends some time on it because he argues that society is, by and large, anti-lifelong learning.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:07:31] Anti-lifelong learning, indeed. He says that “those who [want to] encourage the growth of continuing education”—and this would, for example, be learning businesses; we’re all presumably encouraging the growth of continuing education—“must face the fact that many of the attitudes and values of American society are directly and specifically opposed to the idea of lifelong learning and that this opposition has a vehemence and spread of impact which is not apparent to those who do not feel it directly themselves.”

Celisa Steele: [00:08:05] He goes on to say—and I find this very interesting and important—“The enemy is not apathy, as many would like to believe, but outright opposition, and opposition from places where it counts most—from the family, associates, and friends who surround the person who feels an inclination toward learning.” I think this is very interesting because, personally, I too often perhaps don’t realize the bubble that I live within. And so I’m thinking, well, who in the world could be against bettering yourself through lifelong learning, continuing education, or professional development? But, as Houle cites in these interviews, often, for that adult who wants to pursue learning, that comes at the expense of time spent at home with family or time spent on the job directly. You have this sort of opposition that the lifelong learner has to grapple with. They have this innate desire, this goal-oriented desire, or this activity-oriented desire to learn. But there are forces at work that make it hard for them to engage, and that opposition can come from very important sources—your colleagues, your family, sources that are hard to ignore.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:21] Yes, I think there’s always, potentially, a sense or a vibe there that somebody who’s actively seeking learning is potentially trying to be better than other people in a way. It can be perceived that way. We’re not going to get into politics here, but I think there is—for example, right now in the United States, and I think this applies in other countries as well—a big divide between the educated and the less educated, and I think there is some of that tension that’s there. It’s a very real current that runs through society, and Houle was picking up on it at that point in time.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:58] I think it’s interesting for learning businesses to acknowledge that because again, as I said, if any listeners or learning businesses are like me and tend to think, “Oh, there’s only the positive spin to be put on bettering yourself through continued learning,” you might need to pause and think about what are the objections? What are the barriers that your learners might be encountering? And is there anything that you can do to help them combat those barriers that might be preventing them from engaging with your offerings?

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Jeff Cobb: [00:10:28] Yes, I think this comes up in a very clear way around the budgeting decisions—budgets for any sort of formal investment in education or learning or even informal investments. People often have to fight for that money, and it's often the first thing that gets cut when times get tough. And I think that does reflect an attitude towards learning that we can get by as we are, and, to further invest in our education and our learning, that's a nice-to-have, not a have-to-have. I think Houle would say it's a have-to-have, but he knows he's up against people who don't think that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:07] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them 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](http://tagoras.com/more).

Celisa Steele: [00:11:43] One of the other takeaways from this chapter, "Step to the Music," that we'll touch on here is that Houle makes the point that "not just learners but also those providing the learning"—again, that means those of you listening to this, those of you working in learning businesses—those providing the learning as well as the learners tend to have one of those three orientations to lifelong learning. So they tend to either be goal-oriented, activity-oriented, or learning-oriented. And it's important to perhaps recognize your own tendency, your own bias, where you tend to think, and make sure that you're not only thinking, if you happen, for example, to be learning-oriented, not only thinking about, "Okay, how does this work for learning-oriented?," but you're also taking off your blinders and thinking about, "Okay, how do we also serve the goal-oriented? How do we also serve the activity-oriented?"

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:33] Yes, and you referenced earlier feeling like maybe you're in a bubble at times, and so you don't recognize some of these points of tension and opposition that are there. Houle says: "Anyone who believes all adult education can be fitted into a single neat pattern is either hearing only the reverberations of his own ideas"—basically in a bubble, navel-gazing—"or clinging to the uniformities of a day which is now past." The "We've always done it that way" sort of stuff. Right on at the time that he was writing this, right on now in terms of the issues that can come up and how we think about ourselves as providers of learning and education.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:12] Yes, it's interesting. He's giving these lectures in 1960. As a reminder, the book is based on a series of lectures. Then he collected them, wrote them down, and

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published them in 1961. But you think 1961, and here we are recording in 2024, and he's talking about how the field of adult education is complex and there're competing theories and competing priorities in the field.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:36] This is completely relevant.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:37] Could have written that about today, for sure. At the end of the chapter, Houle writes this: "What is needed is a more concerted effort, by educators and such allies as they can enlist among the value-establishers of our society, to express the importance of continuing education as clearly and as universally as they can so that the message finally penetrates to all those different clusters and groups of people who make up the public."

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:07] I love that phrase "value-establishers" because that's essentially influencers now. You need your influencers to work with you. But, again, both then and now, value at the heart of it.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:19] Yes, and so this passage also, for me, speaks to the value of seeing learning businesses as part of what we call the third sector. We have the K-12 sector, we have higher education, but then, once you finish your formal education, you move into that third sector. But if we, as learning businesses, really recognize our role in that larger sector and that we have other folks who are working in that sector, then it begins to be believable that, collectively, we might actually be able to convey and convince others of the true importance of continuing education.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:56] That's chapter two that we've just covered, which is "Step to the Music." Let's move on to the third chapter of this three-chapter, modest volume from Cyril Houle, and this one is "A Cataract of Consequences."

Celisa Steele: [00:15:13] This epigraph, where the title comes from, has to do with medical diagnoses. And this is a little part of that epigraph: "Most medical scientists seem completely oblivious (or ignorant) of the fact that results usually come from many causes, not one.... We ought to use the 'why' in the plural and ask, 'Whys is the patient in coma?' not, 'Why is the patient in coma?'"

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:38] I love that—the plural whys. Of course, what do you call it when two words sound alike like that?

Celisa Steele: [00:15:46] Homonyms?

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:46] Homonym, I guess, yes. W- I- S- E and W- H- Y- S. Wise and whys. I like the way that those correspond with each other.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:56] And so, then, after that epigraph, Houle opens the chapter with this: “Of all the questions that can be asked about continuing learners, the most important is ‘Whys.’” Again, we came to this text saying that we think it can help learning businesses better understand their market. I do believe that it can. And I think one of the important takeaways is that it’s not a simplistic understanding of your market, that there are lots of nuances. There are lots of whys.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:27] Yes. He then talks about three elements that are there for pretty much all lifelong learners that I think are driving those...

Celisa Steele: [00:16:37] Basically, the sorts of circumstances that need to exist for lifelong learners to be able to learn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:42] Right. These are driving those whys in a way. There’s “the recognition of a need or an interest” that has to be there, “the will to do something about it, and the opportunity to do so.” So you have to have those three things lined up as a commonality, as the basis of all lifelong learning experiences.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:03] Yes, that’s the commonality, and that’s what unites lifelong learners. But there’s a lot of fragmentation. We’ve talked about noise. We’ve talked about fragmentation in other episodes before. And so, Houle says, “The organized field of adult education is now fragmented into groups built around institutions, processes, and special approaches; it can gain coherence and unified strength only on the basis of common themes, one of the most significant of which is the nature of the adult learner.” To my mind, that gets back to those three elements: that the adult learner who recognizes a need or interest has the will to do something about it and the opportunity to do so. That’s the commonality. But then, even once they have that, then that array of choices, that fragmentation of “Where do I go to fulfill that need and to exercise this desire to learn?,” that is still confusing and difficult for the lifelong learner.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:01] We’ve talked about this a lot before—that whole arena of the third sector and the broader lifelong learning landscape. We have all of these different types of providers and institutions who are involved in serving adult learners. Not a lot of communication or

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collaboration amongst them, not a lot of coherence, and a learner is having to navigate that space. So the learner may recognize that need or interest and have the will to do something about it, but then figuring out how to connect that with the right sorts of opportunities continues to be a very complex thing.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:37] And then, towards the end of this chapter, the third chapter, which is the end of the book essentially—there is a section on the protocol for how they handled the interviews, but, in terms of the major content, this is the end. He goes back to a concept that he opened with in the first chapter, which is that “the ability and desire to learn aren’t shared equally by everyone, that there are people who identify as being lifelong learners, and there are others who, once they finish whatever education is ‘forced on them,’ they don’t ever really think about wanting to engage in more.”

Celisa Steele: [00:19:14] He closes, though, by saying that even though “the desire and ability to learn aren’t shared equally by everyone, both that desire and the ability to learn can be fostered by good teaching, by careful guidance, by building and enlarging sympathetic enclaves, and providing a range of educational opportunities. These tasks are too great for partial and divided efforts. The inquiring minds of the past have produced most of the advances of civilization. Our hopes for the future must rest in large measure on our capacity to increase the number and ability of those who continue all their lives to share in the benefits and pleasures of intellectual inquiry.”

Celisa Steele: [00:19:51] This is where I feel like you need to cue the uplifting symphony music at the end because he’s making the point that lifelong learners, that’s where most of society’s major developments, major ideas, major inventions have come from. And so, really, what we’re doing in this field, if you’re supporting continuing education, professional development, lifelong learning, you’re significantly contributing to society, to the future of society.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:20] We’ve said it again and again—and probably even more than I recognize under the influence of Cyril Houle, we’ve probably been saying it—but that coherence, that collaborative vision across the many different institutions that serve lifelong learners, dialog between the leaders of those different providers to the sector, the different institutions in the sector, governmental vision behind it, it’s that other 50 years. This is a big thing, that so many people impacted by this society, impacted by this, we need to step up, in the way that Houle is suggesting here, to really support this sector of education.

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Celisa Steele: [00:21:00] I think if you buy into what he is saying here and into his belief in the absolutely fundamental importance of lifelong learning, then that has dramatic impact on what you're doing as a learning business. It is going to say things about what should go into your portfolio, what might have the biggest impact. It's going to say things about partnerships and trying to look for ways to collaborate rather than compete. It's going to impact your vision and mission. It could lead to some radical rethinking of how you approach your market.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:34] Definitely. Now, maybe a little bit of a down note to end on here is that this fascinating book that hopefully we now have you all lathered up to find and read is actually out of print at this point. You might be able to find a copy online or perhaps at a library. We hope libraries are carrying this. We're hoping maybe we can incentivize some publisher out there, through our efforts here, to put it back into publication. But, while we do encourage you to read it—and, again, it's under 100 pages if you can get your hands on it—we realize that's not necessarily going to be easy. That's one of the reasons we wanted to at least offer this book report because we do think it's a foundational text that takes us back to the early days of the emerging field of adult education in the United States.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:21] And so much does remain the same despite the 60-plus years since this book was published. The fragmentation of the adult education field, the societal animosity against lifelong learning—I think those parts also still fit and feel accurate to me. I think the categorization of the learners into activity-oriented, goal-oriented, and learning-oriented also still rings true to me, and I think that is a useful way to think about learners that you might be serving.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:55] Right. And, of course, there has been some change. There's been progress. We have a much better understanding of things like motivations to learn, the underlying psychology around learning, the brain in general, and how learning is now engaged in and delivered, what technology has made possible. All of that has happened, of course.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:17] But I think the real takeaway is that applying this kind of inquiry to our own learning businesses is really beneficial. We want to foster and support inquiry in our learners, but we should also live that out and do that same type of inquiry ourselves. It's going to help us better understand the learners that we serve and not simply as marketing personas that could potentially work for any industry but really as types of learners, really thinking about how our market thinks about learning.

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Celisa Steele: [00:23:57] *The Inquiring Mind* by Cyril Houle was written in 1961, but it's a foundational text that can still provide learning businesses with a better understanding of the motivations of the learners they aim to serve.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:09] At [leadinglearning.com/episode419](http://leadinglearning.com/episode419), you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. And if you haven't yet, please subscribe.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:19] We'd be grateful if you would take a moment 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 others search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:34] And please spread the word about Leading Learning with other inquiring minds. You can do that in a one-on-one exchange, and you can do it through social media. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode419](http://leadinglearning.com/episode419), you'll find links to connect with us on LinkedIn, X, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:51] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](http://www.danosongs.com)]*

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