What's Necessary to Learn

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 425

Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] Learning is a complicated, nuanced process. But, despite the complexity, really only three things are required to learn well: motivation, time, and effort.

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

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:17] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:26] From one perspective, learning is a natural, intuitive activity that all humans engage in. From our birth on, we're learning. We learn as we develop. We learn how to sit up, how to crawl, how to walk. We learn how to understand and then create language. As we grow, we learn how to read, how to write, how to persuade.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:44] And yet, despite learning being a natural and common activity, there's still a lot we haven't fully appreciated or have only recently learned about how learning happens—and therefore how learning businesses can best support their learners.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:59] In this episode, number 425, we want to focus on some of the most important takeaways from andragogy and learning science, things that can help you be a better learner yourself and things that can position your learning business to help tackle common barriers to learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:16] While there are plenty of nuances and neuroscientific details that go into learning, fundamentally we believe learning requires three elements: motivation, time, and effort.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:29] Time, that speaks to when learning happens. Effort, that's required for how learning happens. And motivation, that provides the why of learning. All three—time, effort, and motivation—are needed.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:45] Definitely. With motivation and effort but no time, learners can't really make progress.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:51] With motivation and time but no effort, no durable learning is possible.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:57] And, with effort and time but no motivation, progress is going to be pretty slow and directionless.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:05] Yes, I might call it efficient but not necessarily effective in that case. And so we need time, motivation, and effort for learning to happen. Those aren't particularly complicated elements, but I think they're often overlooked.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:20] It's so true. I think we're positioned from early on in our lives to overlook them, at least in the United States. If you think about the education that we receive, that pre-K–12 system that we're all participating in, when you're young, it's really not set up to position us well to be self-directed learners. You look at that system, and basically it directs us all the way through, dictating when and where learning happens, relying heavily on external motivators—the required attendance, the subjects that we have to take, the teacher-assigned grades. Often, we don't get a great explanation around how to study effectively, how to actually be a good learner. We're much more focused on the short-term gains of ineffective learning practices, like cramming, which I'm sure we've all done, or going through our notes and highlighting them. In general, we're not set up to think about how learning happens and about how to position ourselves well to be these motivated learners that know how to manage our time around learning and understand the effort that we're going to have to put into the learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:32] So we want this episode to help fill that gap just a little bit. What we want to touch on are some of the most important takeaways from andragogy and learning science. These are things that we think, when you become aware of them, they're going to help you tackle some of the common barriers to learning. You'll hear people talking about they don't have enough time, or that they have no time at all. Or people who still are struggling to know what to do or where to find resources. Or, even as you were talking about with cramming and highlighting, Jeff, sometimes a misunderstanding of what goes into effective learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:08] Yes, lots of misunderstandings around that. As a reminder, andragogy is the method and practice of teaching adult learners. It's oriented towards adult education. Pedagogy is about teaching children. Andragogy is about adult education, associated, of course, with Malcolm Knowles. And I'll say that we think of this as an approach, as a set of

assumptions. Knowles himself described it as a set of assumptions. It's not really learning science per se, but it is very helpful, very useful conceptually when thinking about adult learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:43] We want to draw on some of the takeaways from andragogy, but we also want to draw on takeaways from learning science, and that is where you get data and research that really look at which ways, which practices are most effective for instructors to teach, that will help students then learn more effectively. We want to draw from both those domains: andragogy and learning science.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:09] Let's start with the first of the three pillars that we've proposed here out of motivation, effort, and time. We'll look at motivation first. I will say that, personally, I've become much, much more appreciative over time of how important motivation is for people who want to learn because, ultimately, the learner does have to take on a certain level of responsibility for their learning—we've written about this in a number of cases—and that requires a certain level of motivation. Motivation can be more or less conscious. We're not always fully conscious of what drives us, but we exist across a spectrum, and motivation can be more or less intrinsic. We've talked in the past about intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation. Our theory is that, if you can be more conscious and if your motivations can be more intrinsic, that's probably an optimal learning state.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:05] On the intrinsic motivation side, there have been studies done that show that intrinsic motivation is more powerful than extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation ties to self-determination theory, where you have this idea of, "I really need to be invested in my own learning, my own choices." And so that ability to make sure that your motivation for learning ties to some goal that you identify with rather than getting the A—back to that K–12 system we were talking about—or passing the test, or whatever it is. It's something much more personal. "I want to know about that because I'm curious or because it will help me solve this problem in my life." That intrinsic motivation is much more powerful. Self-determination theory—we associate that with Edward Deci and Richard Ryan—and, again, a lot there ties to this idea of adults wanting to have that autonomy, wanting to have that sense of buy-in in what they do.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:05] I think, as a lifelong learner, the more you're able to identify, to tap the intrinsic motivations that you may have in any learning situation, that's going to serve you well. It's not that extrinsic motivators aren't there or can't be attractive, but, for example, if you're engaged in a learning activity because you want a raise, you want to get that monetary reward, why is it that you want that monetary reward? Dig deep and figure out what your real

motivation is, what that deeper intrinsic motivation is. This connects to the other point we're making here around motivation, which is that you can be more or less conscious of your motivations, and we'd advocate trying to be as conscious of your motivations as possible, and also having a good sense of yourself as a learner and what learning requires. This would be metacognitive skills that enable you to more fully and more productively know your motivations that then direct your learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:03] I think that metacognition also helps you be aware of mindset. We know how important mindset can be in learning situations. You have Carol Dweck helping to popularize the ideas of either having a fixed mindset or a growth mindset. If you have a fixed mindset, where you believe that your own and others' abilities, skills, and knowledge are fixed quantities essentially, then that gives you a very different spin on why you might take a course. Because, if you don't really believe it's going to change you, you're not going to be as open to the full range of what a learning experience might help you do in your own life. The growth mindset, on the other hand, where you believe that you can grow and change, that opens you up to step in wide open to that learning experience and be thinking about, "Wow, this could change how I approach X, Y, and Z or how I do things." And so that mindset, and even that metacognition to be aware of your mindset, can be very powerful in how effective any particular learning experience is for you as a learner.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:09] I think also in that metacognition bucket, and certainly related to this idea of consciousness, is reflection. Reflection is something that we've talked about many times as being so important for learning in general but particularly for self-directed learners. Really being able to step back and look at your performance, at...

Celisa Steele: [00:09:29] …your feelings, at your willingness to try and fail. All of those things are important to reflect on. And I would say too that it's really important to be honest in your reflection because, if you're going to look at something like your performance, to get the full learning potential out of that reflection, you have to honestly say, "Wow, I did fail when I tried that." And then you begin to unpack why or what you might do differently. But, if you aren't honest in your assessment, and you say, "Well, I did fine," that's going to limit what improvements you might make and what new skills and how you might progress in your development.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:07] Yes. I'd say related to all of this, the mindset and then the reflection, is attention and being aware of your attention and then paying attention to when and how you're able to learn best, really kind of…. We've talked about this at events we've held before where

you attend an event; you're present at it. But then we talk about attending *to* an event, which means giving it your attention and being aware of being in that learning situation, being aware of the need for a particular mindset, being aware of reflection, generally being conscious of that learning experience. And I would tie all of this back again to that intrinsic motivation and self-determination theory. I think when you are able to engage these metacognitive skills, be aware, reflect, attend to how you learn best, you're more in control. You have that autonomy that Deci and Ryan talk about. I think you probably also have a greater sense of competence around what you're doing, which is another factor that comes into their self-determination theory. So all of this is bundled up under that heading of motivation for us.

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Celisa Steele: [00:11:52] The second pillar that we've posited as an essential element for learning is effort. To learn, we must pay attention, and, to pay attention, that requires energy. Jeff, you began talking about attention as we were wrapping up talking about motivation. But here, in the case of effort, when we're thinking about attention here, it's an acknowledgment that, to pay attention, it does require energy, and we can't expect to expend high effort indefinitely. We have to be aware of the load that learning takes. And there are many takeaways from this. One would be, for example, we shouldn't attempt to multi-task. There have been many studies that show that we can't actually multi-task in the first place, that you're essentially doing one thing for a short period of time, switching to another thing for a short period of time, and going back and forth, and that level of divided attention really prevents learning. We know from studies of learning around cognitive load that we need to give learning our full attention if we're going to be able to absorb and process and then begin to move from short-term memory into long-term memory what we are learning, what's being talked about in that learning experience.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:09] Yes, there's this level of attending to ourselves as learners and being aware of being learners but then paying attention to what it is that we are trying to learn. I said earlier that I've come to appreciate motivation much more. Even more so, I've come to appreciate the role of attention in learning because, if you can't capture somebody's attention as a teacher, if you can't make the effort to give that attention as a learner, that connection is just not going to

be made. And this is something we talk about in our "Presenting for Impact" course. If you're an instructor, if you're a facilitator, gaining the learners' attention and being able to maintain that attention…of course, we know in this world we live in right now that can be extremely hard with all of the things that are competing for our attention.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:54] And then we know, to learn the most, we also need to engage actively—engagement, that requires effort. There are many ways that we might engage, that we might put in the effort to a learning experience. One very common and old way of putting in some effort is around notes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:15] Right. Just taking notes while we're in a learning experience, that sounds like a no-brainer. But I've often been in rooms—whether I'm in the front of the room teaching, or I'm sitting in the room and looking around—and people are not necessarily taking notes. In fact, a lot of them aren't paying attention because they're multi-tasking. But, even if they are paying attention, they may not be taking notes. And, of course, there are approaches to notes that are more effective than others. In the first place, there's some evidence that handwritten note-taking can be more effective than digital note-taking. You can get into arguments about that, but that seems to be generally true. But then there are other good, solid approaches for how to take notes in a way that you're going to be able to memorize and set yourself up for review and the reflection that we talked about better than if you're just randomly scribbling on a sheet of paper and thinking you'll do something with it later.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:00] One specific method is the Cornell method, and it essentially has learners divide a note page (a physical sheet of paper usually) into notes, cues, and summaries. The notes are what you're jotting down, those key points from a lecture, for example, or from a conference session that you're attending. And you're not trying to write down everything; you're trying to jot down those key points. And then you might often add cues after the fact. Cues would be, "Okay, what is that note tied to?" It might be in the form of a question that the note essentially answers or other ways to assign headings or questions that help group and organize your notes. And then you would have a summary section where you are jotting down those key takeaways. So, if someone asks you, "Okay, how was that breakout session at the conference?" You could read that sentence or two. Or those handful of bullet points that you put there, those would be the key takeaways from that session. There are these established forms like that. Or, of course, you can develop your own.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:04] But the main thing is to be aware that note-taking can help you learn and then to have a format because, if you are trying to invent a format every time, that adds to

the cognitive load of your experience in that learning environment. I you already know how you're going to take your notes, that helps you focus your available mental bandwidth on the actual learning that's happening, that learning experience that you're in at the moment.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:29] Yes, and I'd say this approach to note-taking points back towards metacognition because, when you're consciously taking notes in a certain way, you're aware of yourself as a learner in a learner activity and really attending to that activity in a particular way, all of which does take effort, which is what we're talking about here.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:46] Now, another way to engage—and this already popped up in some of your comments, Celisa—is obviously to ask questions of the instructor, of the facilitator, of your peers, of yourself, as you're going along and really challenging yourself to do that. Don't be passive. Take that material you're receiving and probe and poke and ask about it.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:06] And be sure to make use of your prior knowledge. As adults, we come in with a range of experiences, past learning that we've engaged in, and so we tend to bring to any particular subject or topic some prior knowledge. One of the most effective ways we can put in a little bit of effort is to connect what we're learning with what we already know, so you're beginning to tie the new material, the new concepts to what you already know. That helps to anchor it in your mind. It helps to put it into your long-term memory. You can also begin to elaborate, so you're taking whatever concepts you hear, maybe tying it to past experience, and beginning to elaborate and think about how that applies to your own work or your own life.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:50] I would say a good facilitator, a good instructor is going to help you do this. They're going to provide circumstances that are going to make that part of the learning activity, but it's also part of reflection for you to reflect on what that prior knowledge is. And then, of course, as part of that and beyond that, look for the applications of what you're learning in your real life, in your work, or wherever you're thinking it applies. What problems or needs do you have that what you're learning might actually help you with? And think about how you would really apply what you're learning against that problem, against that opportunity.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:24] Another way to put in effort that's going to help you learn more effectively is around active retrieval. You mentioned highlighting earlier on in our conversation, Jeff. Highlighting is a relatively passive way of reviewing material. Active retrieval has you not just re-reading your notes but actually using some of those questions of yourself, quizzing yourself on key points and seeing, "Okay, can I actually pull out the important information

based on my own questions of myself?" So you don't want to just look at what's in front of you; you want to practice that actively. "Without any paper in front of me, can I come up with this information? Can I apply these skills without the crutch of the notes beside me?"

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:09] Yes, that's another thing I've gained so much appreciation for over time. Honestly, I find it can often be very painful to do this. It does take an unusual level of cognitive effort, at least for me. But the payoffs are just so large when you work without a net and have to bring whatever you learned out of your mind on your own, without passively doing something like reviewing notes.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:36] And so all of that ties into reflection and being aware of what's going on—that metacognition—all that's going to help you know when to push ahead and when to take a break and then maybe return later to that topic because, again, it does take effort, and effort requires energy, and we don't have limitless energy. So you do need to be aware of when your energy and your effort begin to flag. Maybe that's a signal to take a break rather than trying to force yourself to plunge ahead. There's a lot to be said for taking breaks, giving your brain that mental pause so that you can come back and re-engage and be more effective in your learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:16] Yes, and I'd say too that lifestyle factors can come into play here and impact what level of effort you're able to put into things. I'd say they probably can impact your motivation at times as well. Getting enough sleep. Getting high-quality sleep. Trying to manage stress, manage your diet. Getting exercise. All of these things play a role in how well we're able to show up to learning, how well we are able to pay attention, to engage, to tap into our motivation to learn.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:45] And then, ultimately, how well we're able to remember because we know that memory is heavily affected by all those things you ticked off: sleep, stress, diet, and exercise.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:06] That's motivation and effort out of our three pillars here. Let's talk about the third and final one, time.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:14] One of the points we'd like to make is that learning is both episodic and continuous. If you've been tuning into the podcast for any amount of time, you may have heard us say, or you may have heard elsewhere other people saying, that learning is a process, not an event. And we do believe that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:32] Absolutely.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:33] But events (meaning courses, conferences, etc.) do factor into the process of learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:40] That's right. The process is made up of events of a sort that can continuously happen over time, consistently happen over time. Of course, there are ways to improve learning in those episodes. If it's a specific course, a Webinar, or a conference session or whatever, we obviously know that there are things to do, that they can make those better designed, that can make you better able as a learner to take advantage of a particular episode. But then there's also improvement across those episodes. Are you able to set goals? Is there an overall learning plan? We've talked a lot about pathways. How do you think about a pathway, whether you're doing that for your learners or helping your learners design their own pathway and thinking about that process taking place over time?

Celisa Steele: [00:22:23] I think we've all heard—I know I even say it myself—but learners often feel like there isn't enough time. Actually, not even learners, I think just adults. Humans these days tend to feel like there's not enough time. One thing that we have heard and that I have come to believe with my whole heart is that time is not a resource; it's a priority. We do have time. It's just how we choose to spend it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:49] Yes, definitely. If you want to seriously engage with learning, if you've got any sort of significant learning goal, you have to make the learning a priority, and you have to make the time for doing it a priority. If you do that, you'll discover that you do actually have time to learn.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:06] I think wrapped up in what you just said there, Jeff, is that you do need to schedule time to learn. If you think it's just going to happen, odds are it's not going to happen because your day is going to fill up with other tasks and other activities that wind up taking all of your available time. So you need to set aside the time, carve it out to learn. And then what you do with the time that you do schedule for learning is important—you can use that time that you're scheduling more or less effectively.

Celisa Steele: [00:23:40] One very effective practice is—above and beyond just carving out time. "Okay, I'm going to go to the conference on these three days," or "I'm going to take this online learning course over the next month." Beyond carving out the time for those episodes, for those

events that make up learning, you also need to carve out some time for that more continuous process, for the learning that happens across episodes. That means you're going to then have time for spaced repetition and distributed practice because those are what contribute to durable learning in your progress and help move new information, new skills from that shorter-term memory to your longer-term memory, where you can call on them when needed and where you're much more fluent then in using those skills or that knowledge when they are applicable.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:30] Yes. To be honest, for me, this is at the core of time as a factor in learning because we talked about learning is episodic as well as continuous, happening over time. But it is the "over time" part that is so important. You have to have repeated exposure to whatever it is you're trying to learn. You have to engage with it in different ways, at different points in time, over time. The one shot hardly ever does it for truly learning something. So be aware of this need to space things out and to keep coming back, sometimes repeating things and reviewing them, reflecting on them, trying them in different ways.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:11] I know personally this is something I do as a musician. If I want to learn, say, the scales on a guitar, that's not going to be a one-step process. I'm going to do those same scales repeatedly over and over again, over time, but not just rote repeating the scales. I'm going to have to try them out in different ways, in different contexts over time. And I think this is another aspect of making good use of your time. How do you orchestrate your repetition, your practice, in a way that you're going to vary the context in which you're trying to learn the material and ultimately cement it into your long-term memory?

Celisa Steele: [00:25:46] I think that we also have to be realistic about what is sustainable. We know that our brains get tired, that our brains need breaks, or we need changes of pace or things that are going to re-engage us so that we don't begin to tune out that monotone of a lecture, for example. There are specific approaches like the Pomodoro technique. The idea there is you set a timer for 25 minutes, and you're going to focus on whatever the task or the learning is at hand for those 25 minutes. And then you're going to take a 5-minute break, and you might get up, walk outside, do some jumping jacks, whatever it is, but you're going to do something that truly is a break. Doing those multiple 30-minute segments like that—where you have 25 minutes of intense focus, a 5-minute break, and then you rinse and repeat—suddenly makes a morning of learning possible. If you think you're going to sit down from 8 am to noon and plow through that online course, that's not really as effective because, again, our brains get tired, they need breaks, and so we need to be aware of that. Part of our scheduling, part of our attention to time and its role in learning is to be realistic and to carve out breaks.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:00] The truth is, this is another thing I've come to appreciate—I feel like this is turning into "the things I've come to appreciate about learning over time." But short shots of repetition and practice over time—again, spaced out over time—can be extraordinarily effective. Oftentimes, you're going to sit down and do that four-hour session, which, as you're saying, is hard to sustain. Even if you break it up into chunks, there's still only so much you can absorb in one session. But 5, 10, 15 minutes every morning for two weeks, you'd be surprised what you can learn at the end of that, what you can walk away with. It's actually in your long-term memory that you're now able to know or do or call up when needed.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:39] One of the other things we would like to say about the role of time in learning is the sense of progress and how it can make time feel as you're learning. What we have in mind here is this idea of the S-curve of learning. If you plot out progress as you're learning a new skill, for example, it's natural that that new skill or behavior is going to be pretty hard at first. You're going to have a flatter line of progress at first, while it's new. It's going to get easier over time with practice, so you're going to have a sharper rise in that curve of your learning. And then once you get really proficient, it's going to begin to flatten out again. So you get kind of a sideways S if you plot it on a graph there.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:28] It's important, at some level, just to be aware of this, to have that metacognition, to be aware that learning, in most cases, does go more slowly at first when you're totally new; then you begin to pick up a lot of speed as you're really becoming more fluent with it; and then it becomes so easy that you begin to flatten out again. When you flatten out, that signals that you're ready to potentially jump to another S-curve, to move up to that next tier of learning that you want to do (add on a new skill, add on something new). And, again, you'll expect it's going to be slower at first; you're going to get better at it; and then, once you've really become fluent in it, it'll flatten out again.

Jeff Cobb: [00:29:08] I'm not sure I've ever read anything about this specifically, or if any scientific studies have been done on it, but I suspect those curves become a little bit different over time as you gain more and more expertise in a particular area. I think any of us know when we start out with something brand-new…. My examples are always musical because that's where I think I do a lot of my learning. But, if you start out as a student on the piano, and you don't know anything about playing the piano, at some point in that curve, you're going to make a huge leap, because just from going to knowing nothing to being able to play "Mary Had a Little Lamb" is a big leap. But, as you know more and more, and it gets to be more and more about fine-tuning, this is, again, where I think those metacognitive skills come into play in knowing yourself as a learner, knowing what you're trying to accomplish as a learner, and

you're probably going to have more incremental goals that, frankly, may be harder to achieve than what you were trying to achieve early on in the process. But being aware that this is how things work and that it's a natural flow of building competency over time, I think, helps with managing the whole process.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:12] There's a concept of deliberate practice, and I think that also ties to this idea of improvement over time because, if something's too easy, and if you're aware of that, then that means you probably want to move on and begin to build on that skill or that knowledge. Because, if it's too easy and you just stay at that level, odds are you're going to become uninterested in it. If you try to do something, and it's too hard, then odds are you're going to become discouraged. You want to pitch the practice to your own appropriate level. And that level is going to change over time because, like you said, Jeff, if you go from knowing nothing on the piano to suddenly knowing, okay, which keys play which notes to being able to play "Mary Had a Little Lamb," if you keep playing Mary had a little lamb, you're going to drive yourself crazy.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:59] Or drive everybody in the house crazy too.

Celisa Steele: [00:31:00] So you want to move on. You want to take your deliberate practice and now begin to focus on a new song or whatever your next goal might mean for you. But that's the idea of deliberate practice and being aware of where you really are now. Sometimes you'll have an instructor, a facilitator, a coach, or a mentor who can also help you see that and help you know when it's time to move along. But it's also something for you to cultivate in yourself, that awareness of, "Okay, where am I? Am I ready to take on a new challenge or to turn the volume up on this a little bit? Or am I good right now in terms of what I'm doing?"

Jeff Cobb: [00:31:35] That's a look at time. We've talked about effort as well. We've talked about motivation. Again, our view—this is reductionist, obviously, but boiling things down—the motivation needs to be there. You've got to put in the effort if you really want to learn something. And it all requires time, in both what you do in a specific episode of time but then also what you do consistently and continually over time, putting in that effort, hopefully motivated to do it, to really achieve the learning goals that you set out for yourself.

Celisa Steele: [00:32:17] Learning is a complicated, nuanced process. But, despite the complexity, really only three things are required to learn well: motivation, time, and effort.

Jeff Cobb: [00:32:29] At leadinglearning.com/episode425, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. If you haven't yet, please, please subscribe.

Celisa Steele: [00:32:40] 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 others search for content on leading a learning business.

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Celisa Steele: [00:33:11] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]