



Talking Online Learning with Luke Dowden

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 426

Luke Dowden: [00:00:00] It's not training for the sake of training. It's not education for the sake of education. But it helps that learner gain some kind of economic or social mobility that they are desiring.

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

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:15] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:23] In the U.S., higher education institutions are increasingly interested in serving nontraditional students, in providing credentials beyond degrees, and in using online learning to extend their reach beyond physical campuses. As those changes happen in higher ed, ripples are created that impact the learning business landscape.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:44] Luke Dowden is the chief online learning officer at the Alamo Colleges District, located in San Antonio, Texas. Texas is the eighth largest economy in the world, and San Antonio is the seventh largest city in the U.S. but, unfortunately, has the highest rate of urban poverty in the country. The chancellor has established a moonshot for the Alamo Colleges District to partner to end poverty through education and training.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:12] In this episode, number 426, Luke talks about the good and the bad of online learning becoming an established part of higher education, and he cites online learning's promise of access and agency while not ignoring questions of quality and connectedness. Jeff and Luke also talk about digital credentialing, non-credit offerings, credit for prior learning, and partnerships between higher education and other organizations serving the third sector. Luke points out that competition for attention is often the fiercest competition any learning provider faces. We hope you'll give your attention to Jeff and Luke's conversation, which took place in July 2024.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
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Jeff Cobb: [00:02:05] Your title is chief online learning officer. A couple questions related to that. What is that title in and of itself? A decade or more ago that did not exist as a title, I'm sure. How common do you find that as a title now in your world? Do you have a lot of peers who have that same sort of title?

Luke Dowden: [00:02:25] They do, or they have adjacent titles. You might have associate or assistant provosts of online learning. You may have vice presidents of online and extended education. It's definitely a top title that's emerged in the last seven or eight years. For a long time, there were directors of online learning, directors of distance learning. But as more and more institutions adopted online learning—and this has been nice to be in the industry and see this emerge—you've seen titles that indicate a strategic nature behind them. It's not just the operations. For those of us that have been in online learning for over 15, 20 years, there's a deep set of operational acumen that you need to run a successful distance, online, extended learning program. This elevation of chief or vice provosts or vice presidents of online learning really signals the strategic importance to an institution.

Luke Dowden: [00:03:21] Certainly for us, the Alamo Colleges District, of those 72,000 students, Jeff, almost 16,000 were fully online this past fall. So you can see just for our organization, but, if you look at some of the other trends in the iPads' data, you can see the growth of online learning. And this was before COVID. A lot of people, and rightfully so, we did see a number of institutions realize the benefit of having an online learning platform. We were fortunate. We were already pretty heavily invested in the infrastructure that you need—not just the technology but the people and the training of faculty—before COVID, so that we could really tap into those resources. But hopefully that answers your question in terms of the emergence of that title. It definitely is a phenomenon. For your listeners, Quality Matters is an organization that partners on a report called “The Changing Landscape of Online Education” (CHLOE). The CHLOE report has been tracking the changes over time and the emergence of chief online learning officers. There's a researcher that has been tracking these roles for quite some time.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:31] That relates to my second question because obviously, at this point, online learning is an established fact in higher education. It was before COVID, as you said, and then COVID kicked things up several notches. But an institution really can't exist without thinking about online learning at this point. You've been doing this long enough; you've seen the rise of online as a part of higher education. What do you see as the good of that? This is the good, bad, and ugly question around online learning becoming an established part of higher education.

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Luke Dowden: [00:05:09] I just want to be fair to your listeners. The majority of my career has been in online learning. I know that I said that earlier. I don't consider myself an evangelist. I'll say that very quickly I'm as much a champion as I am a critic of online learning. I think the good is about access, and I want to also be clear that I'm not just speaking to my experience now in San Antonio. I founded an office of distance learning at a Research 1 in Louisiana, and I worked at a small urban community college. I worked at a regional university where I did some recruiting for graduate and adult programs. So, when I respond to your good, bad, and ugly question, Jeff, I'm really bringing in all of that experience.

Luke Dowden: [00:05:50] The good is access. For some learners, learning is education support. They've got family, job, taking care of parents. I talk to a lot of my colleagues and even some learners now that are part of the sandwich generation that are raising their kids, but they're also taking care of parents, or they have other extended family members that they're taking care of. So, for me, the good is the access. And some of that is democratizing learning. There are a lot of learners that might feel lost in a big lecture classroom, so there's a sense of agency that I think online learning gives you. We definitely heard more and more from students that participate in learning in a different way because they can do it on their own time, but they're also finding agency and voice. Those are the good things.

Luke Dowden: [00:06:36] From a personal experience, I first received distance learning as a high school student. I wanted Spanish, and the only way to get it was in a little telephone box and a TV training. You and I are recording on Zoom where it's a lot more synchronous. You could hear them, but there was a delay in the video—that was before compressed video, before asynchronous online learning. But that's how I got Spanish. Spanish I and Spanish II. It was ported in from a university an hour away to my little, small, rural school. So I even think about rural learners that we serve in online learning across the United States.

Luke Dowden: [00:07:13] The bad for us—that's deficit language in my current environment, so we would say "opportunities for improvement"—I think quality assurance. I spoke to the CHLOE report earlier, but what I would tell you is, in the 2022 report.... This is a statement that I want to read because I think it's important, that underscores why I said quality assurance is an opportunity for improvement. Almost all institutions in the CHLOE sample (96%) had adopted quality online standards. So having online standards and the adoption runs pretty high. But there are major shortcomings in the quality assurance (QA) process of those schools that were surveyed. And it comes from a lot of different areas.

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Luke Dowden: [00:07:52] Are faculty designing courses on their own? Are they designing them with an instructional designer? Are they co-designed together? Are they giving courses that are well-designed? How are faculty prepared? What's the wrap-around support for students? I think that's another area where we've put some significant energy here. So that's one. I think the other is understanding the needs of the online learner. Just because they're learning online doesn't mean they don't want to be a part of a community. And we've been fortunate. The discussion around mental health and the need to support mental health of not just learners but people in our society. We've also started to focus, in online learning, on belonging and connectedness, and what are ways that we can create—if it's through a technology platform or through some group, some other technology-mediated way of connecting people within majors?

Luke Dowden: [00:08:46] And I'll speak a little bit about being a parent. I have a son that is one of our community college students and a graduate who talked about the importance of being connected to people in their programs and majors. That's another area that we can always improve and then connecting those learners to the opportunity they're seeking. And what we may think is completion—what we're judged on is completion—it may look very different for them. Completing a course may be the goal for that learner. So understanding their goals as well is another area. Hopefully, that's helpful to your listeners.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:26] 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: [00:10:05] Very with often online learning, and I think even face-to-face these days, colleges are often not serving what we think of as the traditional college and university students anymore. In fact, those are actually in the minority at this point. Whether online or off, I'd love your perspective on how well higher education is rising to that challenge of looking beyond the stereotypical traditional learner and serving the lifelong learner. What are some of the main challenges they're facing with that?

Luke Dowden: [00:10:38] I'm, again, being open about my bias. I think community colleges in Texas are doing an excellent job. I think we have the policy construct in place. Many know

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about House Bill 8—that is our state’s move to fund community colleges based on performance. We have incentives, Jeff, in place to better serve and serve more economically disadvantaged, academically disadvantaged, and adults 25+. There is a connectivity to the business community and the focus on business and industry and their needs. In terms of a sector in higher education that I think has a lot of promise and is doing a good job, I certainly think it’s community colleges. It doesn’t mean that others aren’t needed. We need different types of institutions for different types of learners, and I don’t think we talk enough about that in some of the narratives and the dialog. I have a lot of respect for private institutions and the liberal arts and what they provide. I have a child that is in that learning environment while I have another child that needed the community college and wanted the hands-on and wanted to be able to work and learn at the same time, as we think about work-based learning. We need different types of institutions for different types of learners.

Luke Dowden: [00:11:57] You ask about the challenges faced. I think understanding the market, that’s something that I’ve watched different organizations struggle with. Do they really understand the market that they’re serving? And then will you adapt the delivery in a fast enough method that you can serve more of the market? Meaning that, “Well, should we just always offer them in sixteen weeks, or could it be eight weeks?” One of the institutions I was at, I said, “We want to do what we do in the summer, twice in the fall and twice in the spring,” and people looked at me funny because we would have an eight-week session in the summer and two four-week sessions. I said, “We just want to do what we do in the summer, twice in the fall and twice in the spring.” And I said that enough that, when I had left that organization, that’s what they were doing. You can create a self-fulfilling prophecy. What I mean by that is create the conditions that you are doing something, but you’re maybe doing it over here, and you need to think about your calendar or how you’ll approach the rhythm or the different options and the different configurations of learning.

Luke Dowden: [00:13:02] In Oklahoma one time, there were 52 Tuesdays. So, 52 Tuesdays, if you come, you can earn your degree. And so I still think that there are those opportunities to improve. A couple of the other challenges to your original question of adapting and understanding the market is you do have people that stop in and out. When you work with folks that are learners, that learning is not going to be the first priority because of other priorities in their lives. Then you have to create a way for them to come back in easily. A lot of the work that I did at the last institution in Louisiana was around designing for people to stop out, expecting that, and creating pathways for them to come back in. And the hardest part is that there’s a lot of competition for people’s attention. We’re competing for attention. You’re not just competing against an online competitor or another brick-and-mortar competitor, but you’re

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creating an experience. Think about the things that we like to go and spend money and time on. I would say that people are very mindful of the experience they want, the expectations they're coming in with. I think there's also a new set of expectations that learners are bringing with them, based on what they're experiencing with other services.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:24] Yes, I do think that we often talk about that, that competition for attention—not just being in competition with other providers, other businesses—and also that whole issue of really understanding your market because organizations do struggle with that, understandably, but it is something that most need to put more effort into.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:40] You and I met originally because we were on a panel about digital credentials, microcredentials, alternative credentials, not necessarily your traditional degree. I want to have a little bit of conversation with you about that. What's your perspective at this point on digital credentials? There seems to be a lot of buzz out there about it, particularly in the higher-education world. How much potential are you seeing in that at this point? And what are you seeing as the main challenges to them truly going mainstream?

Luke Dowden: [00:15:13] There's been a long history of continuing ed in this country, and digital credentials and microcredentials in many ways are an extension of that. I want to lend appreciation to the history that we've had—good, bad, indifferent—around continuing professional education because that is a field that has been well established. But it's always been to the side and not in the mainstream of higher education. But digital credentials and microcredentials have really pushed themselves into the mainstream. Are they mainstream yet? No. Do they garner a lot of attention? Yes. For me, for them to become mainstream, the organizations like mine...I'm very proud of our approach and others that really put learners at the center of what we're trying to accomplish with microcredentials, digital credentials, alternate credentials, whatever you want to call them.

Luke Dowden: [00:16:04] We understand learners are struggling in the job market to articulate the skills they have, to quickly upskill and develop new skills, and to have evidence of skills. To the extent that digital credentials help someone provide evidence of something they have, realize a skill that they have, or gain a new skill, they're going to become important. But I think it's important to talk about the learner and the benefit to the learner, and then their connectedness to whatever job or next learning opportunity that it's going to go to.

Luke Dowden: [00:16:34] We reached a point in our work there...we had started with digital badges around marketable skills because companies kept saying people don't have oral

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communication, written communication, critical thinking, teamwork collaboration. Those were the top, regardless of industry. It didn't matter if it was advanced manufacturing, IT, healthcare, it was the same list. So we started there.

Luke Dowden: [00:16:57] But we reached a point where we had to stop talking about badges. We still will report numbers, but we had to talk about skills because skills were what mattered to the learner and what mattered to the employer. To the extent that we stay focused on skills—and the badge or the microcredential, the professional certificate doesn't become the thing—then I think that's where we'll realize the potential. The challenge, though, is that the technology is still emerging around badging and pathways, skills, wallets, comprehensive learner records, and ecosystems. It's dizzying. It's dizzying for us that are in that ecosystem and for learners trying to navigate, "What platform do I put my information on?" And will that be consumed by human resources information systems, which are significant barriers to digital credential adoption? We know that. I believe the first human resource information system that has large-scale adoption, that really starts to ingest these types of records, that will be the game changer for us.

Luke Dowden: [00:18:05] Conversely, we know this from spending time with SHRM, the Society for Human Resource Management, the majority of companies in the United States are not very large companies. They're not. They're small companies who may not have a human resource information system at all. How will they value digital credentials? Again, we're fortunate that SHRM, that serves a medium to a smaller business, is involved in this work. But I think there are lots of challenges to adoption—not to mention the language that we use. We've got a new set of words around upskilling, reskilling, short-term training, digital credentials, digital wallet that, in our work...and we were fortunate. We worked with chambers of commerce that said, "Luke, we don't care what you call it, but, whatever you call it, you have to explain it to us." For higher-ed organizations or any organization, especially those that you work with, Jeff, the language is important, and you have to own the need to educate people about it. Hopefully, in that response—and I know it's a little long-winded—you can see the layered set of challenges with digital credentials being mainstreamed.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:14] Yes, definitely. I hear you and appreciate the challenge on the employer side of being able to make use of those credentials in a scalable way. That is going to change things once we do finally tip on that. On the higher-education side, you can tell me how much this is connected or not because you're more ensconced in this world than I am, but we find, particularly when we're talking with some of our association clients, and they want to work with higher education, they always run into issues because, if they're dealing with an accredited

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institution that's going to grant credit for a learning experience, that's automatically a stumbling block. It slows things down that something has to go through this system, where you're going to earn credit for the learning opportunity. Are you seeing more openness to or focus on non-credit learning opportunities in higher education, and those potentially being reflected in digital credentials? To what extent do you see those connected or not? And, regardless, is there more openness now to non-credit-type activity in the higher education world?

Luke Dowden: [00:20:19] I think it depends on what group of higher-education employees you talk to. By faculty, it varies, at type of institution, by discipline, by part of the country. It varies. Staff members, the same way. I would say here, for where I am now, I'm proud our organization's realized we needed a much more robust set of credit-for-prior-learning procedures. We had an entire group of deans that worked on those. Then you have a set of processes that make it easier for learners, especially our veterans, to say, "Hey, I'd like you to evaluate my learning." This credit for experience is a misnomer. That's talking about terms. We're engaged in credit for prior learning. So I would say I don't know that I've seen a change.

Luke Dowden: [00:21:13] I know that, if you do work in digital credentials, you recognize very quickly you need robust credit-for-prior-learning procedures, practices, policies, and systems so that you can help move that learning. I do think there is a greater recognition of this false wall that we put between non-credit and credit. It's learning. How do we value that to keep people moving towards credentials? Credential attainment is important. You know this, Jeff, and I know this, but you ask any economist, or you look at the Center on Education and the Workforce, and they will show you the lifetime earnings of someone with more credentials over time. And, of course, it's even greater in certain disciplines—business, engineering, computer science, etc. But, still, the difference in someone with an associate's degree and their lifetime earnings over someone with a high school diploma is, in a conservative nature, around a half a million dollars. And then it grows from there.

Luke Dowden: [00:22:15] Credentials are important. They are. And the half-life of skills. You and I both know there's a constant need to replenish your skills because technology takes care of that skill that you had—it serves that purpose—and you need to recalibrate your own self-worth and your own ability to function in a new environment with a set of new realities. I know that's a long answer to that question, but it's some things that I think about in this interconnectedness of the credential and the acceptance of learning. I hope we break that, we stop talking about non-credit and credit at some point. We're not there. I do think there are organizations that are certainly moving in that direction, and those will be the organizations

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that survive the enrollment cliff that many of our colleges and universities in the country are facing.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:19] I do a lot of my work in the trade and professional association world, and one thing I've been increasingly interested in and trying to find connections in is how those worlds might work together productively: higher education and associations. I wouldn't want to miss the opportunity to ask somebody like yourself your perspective on that. Do you see opportunities for collaboration between higher education and trade and professional associations?

Luke Dowden: [00:23:46] I do, but I think it's all about a shared set of values. Do you have a shared set of values around learners and learning? I think there's an opportunity to discuss that and determine that. Do you see a need where you can help stimulate, create, expand talent pipelines? Our country needs more talent to field high-demand, high-wage jobs. To the extent that a professional association and higher education (community college, four-year university, even standalone graduate school programs) can band together to supercharge a talent pipeline for an industry, like semiconductors or any kind of other advanced manufacturing, I think there's an opportunity, but I think it's around understanding the pathway. Can we help create a pathway? Can we bring the curriculum and the learning design? Can you bring the wrap-around support? Because, when you begin to serve different type of learners....

Luke Dowden: [00:24:45] We haven't talked about segments within the adult learning population. They've got different needs. They have transportation needs. They have drop-in childcare needs. I think there's a great need to re-imagine partnerships that serve the whole person, that get them trained and into the talent pipeline. I see great opportunity there. And you need all types of organizations. You need intermediaries. You need businesses that are at the table. You need some foundations that can invest. Maybe there are federal grants or state grants. I live in the world of possibility. I think things are possible, but you don't want to lose the focus on the learner. What are we trying to help that learner accomplish? And then how are we contributing to the greater good of society? Hopefully that doesn't sound too Pollyanna-ish for your audience, but I think that you have to look for areas where the right partner, the right time. We've certainly had those experiences where totally right partner, right time, and it's worked.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:46] Right. I like that you want to focus on possibility. That's not Pollyanna at all. It does obviously suggest the future, what's out there in the future, so I don't want to have you leave the conversation without getting a little of your perspective on the future. What has

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you most excited now, when you do look out at the horizon, what's going on, and you think about what is possible for colleges, universities, continued education out there in the future?

Luke Dowden: [00:26:12] I think there's an opportunity for us to reinvent ourselves, and it's not a far leap. I think it's getting into the delivery mechanisms working. It's moving from just descriptive explanation of who, what, when. But how do we analyze the data that we have on learners and then apply that to improving the learning experience? I think there are some organizations that are doing that really well. As companies move to a skills-based hiring—we know that's still nascent—but there are significant organizations, Walmart, of course, that are involved, investing, and bringing others to the table around hiring based on skills, and how we adjust to ensure that our learners, whatever credential we award, can speak to their skills? They can tell you the level that they have that skill. They can give you examples, and they've got some documentation to back it up. I'm excited about that type of learning design.

Luke Dowden: [00:27:13] But learning design just interests me in general and then the use of design thinking. Do we go through these cycles where we iterate on a learning experience and continue to improve it? But it's really about scale. And the thing that I do have to credit Alamo with is we think about scale here, and how do we serve more and open up more pipelines, Jeff? What excites me is can it help someone get an entry-level, family-sustaining-wage job that then allows them to grow inside of the company? It's not a dead-end job; it's an entry-level, family-sustaining-wage job that then opens up possibilities for that learner. It opens up benefits. It opens up the opportunity for their learning to be paid for by the company or even training inside of the company. That excites me. That excites me for an individual that I may never meet, you may never meet, to benefit from something that we can create by focusing and listening to them and providing training that does just that. It's not training for the sake of training. It's not education for the sake of education. But it helps that learner gain some kind of economic or social mobility that they are desiring.

Jeff Cobb: [00:28:32] What about you as a learner? Switching gears a little bit, we do always like to ask guests about their own approaches to lifelong learning. So do you have specific habits or practices, maybe favorite resources that you'd be willing to share?

Luke Dowden: [00:28:46] I get a lot of learning from LinkedIn. I'm not an influencer. I don't get paid by LinkedIn, but I really enjoy watching what others are engaged in. From time to time, I enjoy participating on panels, Jeff; that's how we met. I get to expand my network. I like that. I'm a connector, and so I like to expand my network. I learn by what others are doing. There are times where I'll just deep dive on a topic—like I'm about to deep dive on artificial intelligence,

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spend a lot of time there thinking about it. But a lot of my learning is with engaging. I'm not consistent. My learning style will flip. A couple of years ago, I was heavy into podcasts. I feel myself entering that learning again because I'm in the car a lot. But those are really it. It's definitely through professional associations and engaging in conferences and panels, as traditional as that sounds. Like I said, yes, I'm a chief online learning officer, and I still like to see people face to face, but I think podcasts are important. I think connecting and networking with people on LinkedIn. And then just engaging with my colleagues here, being present when people are presenting, and learning so much that I can about the field of education, definitely community colleges, I maintain a strong interest in.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:12] Luke Dowden is the chief online learning officer at the Alamo Colleges District. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode426, you'll find a link to the Alamo Colleges District Web site, where you can see how they approach online learning. They've also created six insight briefs that share their journey to elevate training options since introducing microcredentials, and that could be a great source if you're considering adding or elevating microcredentials as part of your learning business's portfolio.

Jeff Cobb: [00:30:46] At leadinglearning.com/episode426, you'll also find options for subscribing to the podcast. We'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as subscriptions give us some insight into the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:30:57] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Those reviews and ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:31:10] And please help us grow the Leading Learning community. At leadinglearning.com/episode426, there's a link to find us on LinkedIn.

Celisa Steele: [00:31:18] 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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