



## The Small Matter of Time

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 434

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Part of the value of any learning experience is determined by the return on investment of the time spent learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:11] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:13] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:21] Hey, Celisa, do you have a minute?

Celisa Steele: [00:00:22] I'd say that depends on what it's for.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:25] Yes, and there's the rub. It seems like, as consumers, as parents or partners, as colleagues, as professionals, really just as individuals alive in today's world, we're constantly being asked for some of our time.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:40] And, as a learning business, we're often part of the crowd clamoring for people's time—we're competing for the very limited resources of people's time and attention.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:52] In today's episode, number 434, we want to focus on the small matter of time when it comes to learning and when it comes to being in a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:04] Time is one of the most valuable resources we have as humans. Learning requires time, yet many people feel they don't have enough time.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:16] Indeed. In conversations that we've had with learning business leaders over a very long period of time, it's common to hear that their learners—whether they're professionals in industries like healthcare, finance, or education or in any sort of field or profession—frequently struggle to find time for ongoing learning.

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Celisa Steele: [00:01:37] I think that complaint about there not being enough time has been a big driver for different formats and learning businesses trying to try things out like microlearning, like podcasts. I was on a panel recently at CMEpalooza about CME podcasts, and a big part of the attraction of the podcast format for healthcare practitioners is that they don't have to be at their desk, so that allows them to maximize their time.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:04] Yes, and you mentioned microlearning. This is a huge driver of all the buzz around microlearning because people feel like, if you can get the learning into those short chunks that, maybe, just maybe, you can convince people to give up a little bit of their time for learning. But that brings us to a brutal truth when it comes to time and learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:23] Yes, it's limited, and learning does require time. So we've got a double whammy there. We have to have it. If we're going to help our learners learn, they have to spend some time, and they feel like they don't have enough time. All of this leads to a double-barreled question, which is, how do learning businesses secure a share of people's limited time, and then how can they help learners make the most of the time that they do invest with them?

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:52] Let's start with that reigning truth that time is necessary for learning. We have to face that. That is a fact.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:02] Learning is not a quick-fix activity. Or, for some very micro skills, it could be a quick activity. But, in general, anything that you're trying to do that's going to result in deep learning requires sustained time and effort.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:16] Yes, we're not quite at the *Matrix* yet. Whenever I see that movie, and Neo has to learn to fly a helicopter at some point, and they just plug him in, and he gets everything he needs—skills, knowledge, experience—to be able to fly. I look at that, and I'm like, "Wow, if somebody could plug that guitar knowledge in for me, I'd take it in a minute."

Celisa Steele: [00:03:38] But we're not quite there.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:39] We're not quite there yet.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:41] We know that there are things like spaced repetition and deliberate practice—those are evidence-based strategies—that we know are very effective for learning, and they're also strategies that acknowledge the important role of time in learning. With spaced repetition, it's this idea of revisiting key concepts, information, or skills periodically with

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deliberate practice. It's also about making sure that, when you do carve out time for practice, that you're practicing in an intentional and focused way.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:10] The great thing about spaced repetition and deliberate practice is they start to tell us some things about how we can use time effectively, how we can make more effective use of our times. Time is essential, but many learners, as we know, are conditioned to seek out quick wins or cramming sessions. This starts in elementary school and high school, certainly goes into college, where you cram everything you can into a study period. And that can work in the short term if you just need to pass an exam. But, if you need to retain something, memorize it, be able to use it over time, that doesn't work. Knowing that spacing things out, knowing that being deliberate starts to point towards how we might manage our time more effectively when it comes to learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:58] All of this speaks to our view that learning businesses have a role to play in helping learners shift away from a mindset of quick results to a more sustainable, time-conscious approach to learning and that learning businesses can help emphasize the value of creating a culture where the time spent on learning is seen as important and seen as an investment, not just as an expense.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:25] Right, and as a high-return investment because you're going to tell them, you're going to help them understand how to get the most out of that time investment so they really are learning. There's that reality that we're not going to help people learn if some time isn't going to be used for learning. But then that does raise questions. People need their time for a lot of things. We are competing for learners' time as learning businesses. How do we think about that?

Celisa Steele: [00:05:51] I think one important thing to realize is that, yes, we're competing for people's time, and we're not just competing for their learning time. Very few people compartmentalize their time that carefully. Typically, what we're competing with is also the time they have for work, the time they have for family, the time they have for exercise, the time they have for relaxation or entertainment. And so we're not just competing against other learning providers; we're competing against life.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:21] Yes. I wish I had the discipline to compartmentalize my time like that, where I could say, "Here's the amount of time I have allotted this day at this period of time, and this is when I will plug in this learning business's learning to help me." But, as you said, that's not what's happening out there. Before we can hope to get a share of people's time in most

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instances, because they haven't necessarily said "This is the time when this is going to happen," we have to get their attention.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:48] Yes. It's challenging to get people's attention because attention requires some time.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:54] Right. There are a lot of things that want your attention. At the time of this podcast, we happen to be in an election season, and I don't know how many messages I'm getting in my e-mail box, on my smartphone right now from candidates who want my attention. They want money. But that stuff is flowing all over the place—messages from friends and family, advertisements, and the stuff of life.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:16] Learning businesses can and should keep this time-strapped mentality that a lot of learners bring to your marketing, to your learning experiences in mind. When you're developing, you've got to keep that reality, as unpleasant as it is, in mind because we have to recognize that our learners, for the most part, usually do feel very time-strapped.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:40] There's an opportunity to build goodwill there if you are creating those bite-sized learning experiences, microlearning, which, generally speaking, is a good thing to be looking at. We're in favor of well-done microlearning. If you're creating asynchronous learning experiences so they're not time-bound, if you're creating mobile-friendly platforms, like podcasts, so they can be done at any time, first of all, you're creating situations where learners do have some autonomy around when they're going to engage with you and how they're going to engage with you—a great practice from a learning business standpoint. But, by doing those things, you're also automatically creating a certain amount of implicit goodwill that you understand these challenges that your learners have.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:23] This reality of how time-strapped our learners are has direct implications for formats that might show up in our portfolio. We also need to keep the time-strapped point of view or mentality in mind when we're promoting our learning products as well because, again, that gets back to, even before someone's going to engage with that microlearning segment that you have or listen to that podcast episode, you first have to get their attention. That means we also have to keep that in mind when we're talking about the learning we're hoping they will engage in, when we're marketing and promoting it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:59] I see at least two sides to that, and there are probably more. But one is we've for a long time advocated good copywriting, knowing how to write in a way that is going

to get people's attention. We've talked about the AIDA model before and applying it to learning—attention, interest, desire, and action. Maybe you've got a marketing team you can count on to help you do that. If you do, then certainly work with them to do that. If not, then, within your learning business staff, as you're writing those course descriptions, as you're writing the e-mail messages you're sending out, you've got to be able to write in a way that gets people's attention or create videos in a way or however you're messaging. And then, in the messaging itself, making it clear that you get it, that you understand that the time is valuable, and clearly conveying how, in whatever amount of time you're asking for, you are going to deliver tremendous value. You're going to help get that big return on investment as effectively and as efficiently as possible out of the amount of time that you're able to get from that prospective learner.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:09] 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: [00:10:43] Implicit in what you're saying there, Jeff, is that there's both a quality aspect of time and a quantity aspect.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:50] We've been talking about how people feel time-strapped. That's the quantity side. We can't wave a magic wand and suddenly give people extra hours in the day. Making a sheer quantity argument of "Hey, you should spend more..."

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:06] "Buckle up."

Celisa Steele: [00:11:07] "Buckle up. Yes, just spend more of your time learning out of your limited 24 hours a day," that's not going to get us very far. We need to shift the focus away from a discussion or edicts to just "Find time" to more about that quality of the time spent. It's not just logging hours but engaging meaningfully with the material.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:29] The fact is high-quality learning experiences can actually reduce the time required for learning efficiently, learning effectively, by promoting deeper understanding and retention in less time—and that's part of our role as learning businesses. We can enhance the quality of learning through interactive content, real-world application, or community

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engagement and using those tools that ensure, when the learner does have an interaction, that interaction has been very well designed to get learning results.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:04] That's right. This is where we can rely on learning science. We can look at evidence-backed strategies and make use of those when we're designing and delivering our learning programs. For example, building in practice and also allowing some autonomy in, say, a project that might be part of a learning experience—doing those things can help make that time spent contribute, yes, to deeper learning but also potentially to helping that learner get something done that they have to do for work anyway. You can then have that one hour of time, if that might be the example, doing double duty. Yes, they're learning, and they're also making progress on some tasks that they need to do for work. This is something we tried to do in "Presenting for Impact."

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:48] Yes, definitely. Build that into your learning experiences. And remember too that, if you're designing learning experiences well in the first place, and you're taking advantage of the evidence-based, science-based approaches to it, you're helping to provide the framework that's going to give learners confidence, that is going to help them feel and see the progress they're making. I know, in my own experience, for example, in trying to get better at the guitar—if you're somebody who's played a musical instrument, and this applies to all sorts of hobbies and avocations, you probably do a lot of floundering and noodling around over time.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:25] We do this in our professional lives too, where we don't really have the structure; we don't really have the pathway; we don't know what to focus on and how to focus on it in a way that's going to really give results. At points in time I've been able to figure out, "Oh, if I engage in these types of activities in this way, spaced out over time, I'm going to see tremendous results." And, once you do that as a learner, and you understand that that works, that that's possible, and you find a source who can provide that for you on a consistent basis—which is what a successful learning business should do—you're going to go back to that source because of the effectiveness, the efficiency, the return that you're able to get off of the time that you're spending in working with the learning opportunities that they're providing.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:11] I think what you're talking about there is that, if you can find a learning experience that helps you be intentional and that delivers that impact, you're seeing those results pretty quickly, that's, yes, a resource you're going to want to go back to again. To explain a little bit more when I said that we do this in "Presenting for Impact," we have a training, a course that we offer for instructors, and you can use the course independently to try to up your game as a presenter, but we also encourage folks going through it to actually work

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on a presentation as they go through it. Again, you have that one hour of investment in the course, but, if you're coming out with a solid draft of a presentation you had to come up with anyway, then that hour spent does double duty.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:57] Part of that is educating the learner on why that little bit—because, in that case, we're saying you could sit there for an hour and just watch, or you can invest a little bit more time actually doing this stuff as you go through it, and guess what, (a) you're going to finish something that you need to finish, and (b) you're going to retain it and be able to use it for so much longer—and making sure the learners understand that, when you're making those asks, that there is a very concrete and high-value reason for it. We often don't do enough to help our learners understand learning and be good learners.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:29] There's probably a parallel in all of this with fitness. For the most part, people understand that, to get in better shape, they're going to have to spend some time working out or exercising. Now, there may still be some snake-oil salespeople out there who say, "Here, just do this in your sleep or whatever," but, for the most part, people who want to improve their physical fitness get that they have to spend some time doing that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:53] Yes, but then often in those cases it's useful to have a coach. It's useful to have somebody structure that for you, to help you spend that time in the right way. I go to a gym occasionally. I don't know how many people I see, and they're bouncing from machine to machine, and maybe they're getting some results; maybe they're not. They're probably not going to be in the gym six months later because they haven't really gotten where they want to go. But, as learning businesses, we can help provide the structure and the understanding for our learners to get the most out of the experiences.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:22] We can be like the coaches or the personal trainers. We can be like the workout regimen that helps the learners get to that next stage.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:31] Part of what learning businesses can do in thinking through time is helping to think through what does time well spent look like in the context of learning? How can we, as learning businesses, frame our offerings so that learners do feel the time they spend is valuable and productive? We've been talking about some of the practical ways, but we can talk a little bit more about some ways that we've seen learning businesses do this.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:59] Yes, we've been hinting at some of these things. For example, learning paths and curated content, these are ways to help get learners to the right content and then to

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the right next content efficiently and clearly. This goes back to the guitar example I was talking about. I've always struggled to find the right learning pathway in learning guitar. When I do happen to latch on to one, those are when I make the big leaps forward. We want to make sure that learners can clearly see that the time that's spent on learning isn't going to be spent on just trying to identify the appropriate opportunities. We've already got the appropriate opportunities there for them, and then we're helping them to really take advantage of those opportunities.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:41] That's right. If you have a good, well curated portfolio and if that portfolio makes clear different learning pathways—if you're new to the profession, here's what you should be taking; or, if you're trying to make the leap to management, here's what you should be taking—anything we can do to make the right content very clear for that learner helps because that means they're not spending the time trying to identify the content; instead, they get to spend time learning that content, engaging with that material, and trying to apply it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:13] Subscriptions or any sort of bundling can be another example of this. It's helping to reduce that time and energy that can be spent on deciding what to learn or what to enroll in and instead channeling that time into actively engaging with the right content that's been presented there for you to engage with.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:33] We touched on it earlier, but I think building in opportunities for application, building in practice opportunities—we have an executive briefing about the role of practice in learning—anything that you can do to help the learner begin to apply and begin to see the real connection between the material and their day-to-day work is going to be huge because the time *away* from work to participate in a course then becomes time *on* work. It's something very clearly that they're going to be able to move more quickly through what they need to do and more effectively through what they need to do on the job.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:09] Many learning businesses, an increasing number, do put the time in to create personas of the people who they are trying to serve. Something that I don't often see focused on with personas is how is that person perceiving and managing time? What are their time challenges? And then, from the standpoint of the learning business, how do we create in a way that connects and helps alleviate this person's time challenges in the items that we're creating for our portfolio, in the learning experiences we're creating, whether it's microlearning, pathways, or some of these things we're talking about? Also, how do we message that person in a way that tells them, "We get this. We've got your back. We are, in fact, going to help you take that very limited amount of time that we know is so challenging for you to manage and really

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get a huge amount out of it when you use some of that time to engage with the learning experiences we provide.”

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:12] Part of the value of any learning experience is determined by the return on investment of the time spent learning. As good stewards of your learners’ time, think about how you can create more impactful learning experiences that maximize the value delivered.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:29] At [leadinglearning.com/episode434](http://leadinglearning.com/episode434), you’ll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. If you haven’t yet, please do subscribe.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:39] 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: [00:20:54] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one conversation or e-mail to a colleague, and you can do it through social media. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode434](http://leadinglearning.com/episode434), you can follow the link to connect with us on LinkedIn.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:09] Thanks again, and we’ll see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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