Celisa Steele: [00:00:03] If you want to grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business, you're in the right place. I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:10] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:16] In this episode, we're peering into the not-so-distant future. We're taking a look at 2030 and what continuing education might look like five years from now.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:27] Our conversation is grounded by a recent Webinar we led, titled "A Look at Continuing Education in 2030: Disruption, Competition, and Changing Expectations." During that live Webinar, there was a lot of chat activity and some wonderful, insightful contributions from attendees.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:43] So much so that we hosted a follow-up online meeting that we invited Webinar registrants to attend. That meeting was less presentation and more conversation. By the way, that's something we're thinking we'll do more of going forward.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:59] What we'll talk about today comes out of the prep we did for that Webinar, the chat contributions during the Webinar, and then the discussion that happened during that follow-on conversation.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:09] Today's discussion will, we hope, distill some of the most powerful and provocative themes that came out of all that we did to take a look at CE in 2030.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:20] If 2030 sounds far off, remember that's just five years away. Think back to 2020—five years wasn't that long ago, but so much has changed. Now's the time to be thinking about how learning businesses will not just survive but thrive with their CE offerings in the years ahead, 2030 and beyond.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:41] What we'll talk about today are seven strategic shifts—areas of change that learning businesses need to understand and act on to stay relevant, responsive, and sustainable.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:55] The first strategic shift is one we've seen building over time: personalization. For years now, we've heard organizations say they want to create more

personalized learning experiences. While progress has been made, we're still pretty far from truly personalized, bespoke educational offerings being the norm.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:16] There are organizations that are making strides by doing things like investing in segmented marketing, mapping out learner journeys, and more intentionally making use of behavioral data to refine their offerings. But many organizations also know that they're still largely product-driven, product-first—designing a course and then trying to match it to a market—rather than truly audience-first and starting with a learner's needs and building from there.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:45] One newer and more nuanced idea we heard in the follow-on discussion was around micro-personalization—the idea of creating small slices of learning that are tailored to learners' immediate context and delivered at the right moment, that moment of need.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:01] Think of this like a Spotify playlist for learning. Instead of a monolithic course, learners get modular, relevant snippets—say, a quick simulation, a three-minute video, or a just-in-time reference guide—something that meets them exactly where they are in their day-to-day work.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:19] Of course, that kind of personalization doesn't just happen. It depends on competency frameworks, self-assessment tools, and often artificial intelligence that can help make real-time recommendations. And building those systems, especially well-structured ones, can be complex and resource-intensive.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:40] But here's the key—personalization is moving from nice to have to strategic differentiator. In a crowded, competitive market, the ability to say, "We know who you are and what you need" carries real weight.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:55] To be clear, personalization doesn't always mean fully custom. It doesn't have to be a fully bespoke offering assembled dynamically at the point of need for a specific learner. Sometimes personalization is as simple as suggesting a learning pathway based on that learner's prior participation, job role, or some self-identified goal.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:17] It's also worth asking, "Are you thinking about personalization only in terms of content? Or are you also personalizing timing, format, pacing, and support?" These are all elements that shape the learner experience.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:32] Jeff, I know that social is another element you like to think about or talk about in terms of personalization.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:39] It is. Social is all about dialogue. Whether the learner is in dialogue with other learners or with a subject matter expert, it puts the learner in the position to ask about her specific concerns, needs, issues—whatever the broader topic is, to bring it down to that personal level for that particular learner. Social learning, cohort-based learning, community-based learning is one probably the oldest form of a no-technology-needed personalization experience.

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Celisa Steele: [00:05:12] The second strategy shift we want to mention is point-of-need learning. This is one of those concepts that's easy to get excited about (easy for me!), but it can be hard to operationalize.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:23] During our follow-on conversation, Gayle Claman shared an example from engineering. She pointed out that early-career engineers often turn to mentors or colleagues—not CE courses—when they face a new challenge. It's informal, it's fast, and it fits their workflow.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:41] That's a critical reminder. For CE providers to be relevant at that point of need, we need to be asking, "Are we even in the learner's consideration set when a problem arises?" And, if the answer is no, then we need to ask, "Why not?" Part of the issue may be this older view that we're clinging to that learners need to come to us as learning businesses versus us going out to serve learners where they are.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:06] A few organizations are working to close that gap. Some are embedding microlearning directly into tools or platforms that professionals already use—think apps or project management software. Others are developing searchable resource libraries where content is tagged to real-world tasks or use cases. Some are leveraging chatbots or other ways that individuals can quickly locate the information they need in what can often be an overwhelming set of resources that a learning business has amassed.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:38] There's also the potential for newer tools to help. NotebookLM is a Google AI tool, and it can be used to convert material—even dense, technical material—into digestible audio content. That makes the information more accessible and more usable in moments where time and attention might be limited.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:59] This kind of modality flexibility—text, audio, video, whatever fits—is central to point-of-need learning. But, to make that possible, you need well-organized content and clear metadata.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:12] A key question here is, "What would it look like if our learners didn't have to come find us? What if we were already where they are, embedded in their moments of challenge or curiosity?"

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:24] That's a provocative vision—and one that's likely to become more feasible as AI tools get better at context sensing and content matching.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:34] Our third theme is a big one: the evolving credentials landscape. We've entered a time that we've called the credentials shake-up, and it's showing no signs of slowing down.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:47] Learners definitely want credentials, but they want them to be stackable, flexible, and visible—visible especially online. And many traditional systems weren't designed with those values in mind.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:08:01] We know of organizations issuing digital badges for certificates aimed at younger professionals, for example. This is partly about market expansion—maybe reaching underserved audiences. But it's also about adjusting to a world where learners want more control over how they document and how they're able to communicate their expertise.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:21] This is where some friction can arise. Accrediting bodies aren't necessarily keeping up with these shifts, and so some learning businesses can be constrained by things like seat-time requirements, older reporting systems, or other legacy issues.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:37] Employers aren't necessarily keeping up either. We're starting to see some transition there. But some learning businesses are innovating around the edge, creating offerings that offer real value but don't necessarily count in traditional ways. That can be both risky and liberating.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:55] We also heard the view that younger professionals are less interested in credits and more interested in skills that they can show off, and that might be in a portfolio, on LinkedIn, or during a job interview.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:07] So the challenge becomes how do you create credentials that travel—ones that are trusted by employers, usable by learners, and sustainable for your organization?

Celisa Steele: [00:09:18] That is a strategic question—one that can't be answered in isolation. It needs to be part of a broader rethinking of your learning portfolio and the place of credentials in your business model.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:33] We've covered three strategic shifts so far: personalization as a strategic priority, point-of-need learning, and fragmentation and innovation in credentials. Next up: artificial intelligence—arguably the biggest driver of change in nearly every industry, including CE. In some ways, AI is hard to separate out from the other shifts we're talking about. AI has already come up multiple times in our conversation about how those first three shifts are happening.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:02] AI has the potential to revolutionize how learning is created, delivered, and consumed. AI is an enabler, but it's also a disruptor. What's the role of a learning business when AI can do parts of what we do faster, cheaper, better?

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:21] There's the very real possibility that AI will soon be able to build bespoke learning experiences from massive content repositories, assembling a course on the fly from building blocks that are already in your catalog.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:35] That changes, fundamentally, the job of the learning provider. You're no longer just designing experiences. That puts more emphasis on curating, tagging, and structuring your content so artificial intelligence can work with it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:50] AI might reduce the need for multiple content formats. You might only need a single master version, perhaps loaded into something like a custom GPT (as we've

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discussed before), and AI will handle the rest, turning it into a video, a slide deck, an article, an interactive chatbot, whatever, based on the learner's needs and wants.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:13] That's a profound shift. It means learning businesses need to invest in content governance—taxonomies, tagging, competency alignment—so that your materials are ready to be remixed and reassembled.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:28] You mentioned NotebookLM earlier, Celisa. The ability exists now to create podcast-style guides from existing materials. That's a glimpse of what's to come. Imagine a future where learners expect that level of flexibility and responsiveness as the norm.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:45] The point isn't to go out and start using NotebookLM or to choose any particular new tool to chase. It's much more about building infrastructure and strategy that lets your learning business adapt. If you're thoughtful now, you'll be more agile later.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:03] Theme five is one many of us are already feeling—CE is becoming a commodity.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:09] Yes, learners increasingly are prioritizing things like convenience, usability, and experience over other, maybe more traditional measures of quality.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:21] One of the Webinar participants who leads learning at a healthcare association, for example, reported that some learners will choose a course that's faster and easier, even if it's technically less rigorous, because it fits their lifestyle better. That's a wake-up call.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:37] In a crowded market, being high-quality isn't enough. You have to be high-quality, fast, easy to access, relevant, and affordable. That's a lot.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:47] That is a lot. So what's the differentiator? It might be the curation, the community, or the context you provide—or even some level of access to the subject matter experts. Those are harder to replicate, and they can offer much more defensible value.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:02] That reminds me of some of the ground that you covered in your conversation with Dhawal Shah of Class Central, Jeff. Especially that community piece. Dhawal flat-out said a learning business shouldn't try to compete with Big Learning providers (Coursera, Udemy, etc.) on price. That's a losing battle there because of the sheer scale involved.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:22] This ties back to business models. If your value rests solely on CE credits, you're vulnerable. What happens if someone else offers the same credit faster or cheaper?

Celisa Steele: [00:13:33] Or if learners start asking, "Why do I need the credit at all?" I don't think that's a hypothetical question. That's already beginning to happen in some sectors.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:43] Our sixth theme is a more internal one versus the external competition we were just talking about, but it's no less important: silos.

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Celisa Steele: [00:13:52] Yes, we hear repeatedly and consistently about challenges related to siloed departments. You have education working separately from marketing, and you have communications that aren't aligned with credentialing, and so on and so forth.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:06] This fragmentation makes it harder to deliver cohesive experiences, and it slows down innovation. Breaking down silos may require structural changes—shared KPIs, cross-functional teams, or even reorganizing departments.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:22] But it can also start small and less radically than some of those things you just suggested, Jeff. It could be that you start with some joint planning sessions, integrated calendars, or a more collaborative product development process. Because the goal is to act more like a unified learning platform and less like a patchwork of separate functions. Jack Coursen from the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA) mentioned that, years ago, he made the move to have the professional development team start talking to the marketing team very early in the process—not when a course was ready to launch and they needed to try to drive enrollments but back when the course was being identified as a need and was just beginning to be created, that was when he started talking to marketing.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:10] This also means a shifting culture in many organizations—rewarding collaboration, encouraging experimentation, and sharing both risk and wins.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:22] In a lot of ways, all seven of these shifts that we're talking about, to some extent, tie into a shift in culture. But certainly with that one around silos, I definitely see the connection there.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:32] The seventh and final strategic shift that we'll mention today is data, specifically the shift from isolated dashboards to data ecosystems that prioritize things like interoperability and integration.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:47] In the past, we were happy if the LMS showed us completion rates or test scores in a somewhat easy way. In fact, we're still very happy if it does that for us. But the bar now is much higher.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:59] Centralized data lakes are becoming more common and more appealing because these allow LMS, AMS, e-commerce, and engagement data to live together. Which then means you can query all that data in powerful ways. Often you're going to make use of AI to help you with some of that querying.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:21] That kind of infrastructure enables not just reporting but personalization (which we've talked about), prediction, and automation. But it doesn't happen by accident.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:32] Organizations are going to have to make that decision to invest in interoperability. They're going to need to choose systems that talk to each other. And they're also going to need to invest in data governance so that they can make sure that they have high-quality data, that the data is consistent, that there's security around all of that data.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:16:50] If data is the fuel for innovation, we need to make sure it's clean, accessible, and ready to use. That's not a tech project—it's a strategic imperative.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:06] We're about to recap the seven shifts that we think warrant some attention for learning businesses looking to offer continuing education that's valued in 2030 and beyond, so stick around to the end.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:18] At leadinglearning.com/episode456, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:26] If you enjoy the Leading Learning Podcast, please share an episode with a colleague or co-worker you feel would appreciate and get value from it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:34] So let's recap the seven strategic shifts shaping continuing education as we head towards 2030.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:41] First, personalization is moving from optional to essential. Learners expect relevance at the individual level, and that expectation is growing over time for true personalization, ultimately down to individualization.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:57] Two, point-of-need learning is incredibly valuable, as it meets learners where they are. But we're still building out how to achieve and monetize point-of-need offerings.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:09] Yes, that can still be a bit tricky, but the value of point-of-need learning is so valuable that it warrants trying to crack those nuts. Then, third, we talked about credentials and how they're fragmenting. Stackable, flexible recognition is in, and skill or knowledge demonstration is gaining ground over older measures like seat time.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:31] Four, this hardly needs to be said, but AI is changing the game, both enabling new capabilities and requiring new strategies.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:39] Fifth, competition and commoditization are real. These realities make not only what you offer but how you offer it important. There's a growing expectation among learners that it should be easy, relevant, and enjoyable to engage with you or any learning provider.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:58] Number six, silos stall strategy. Integration—of teams, systems, and goals—is key to innovation.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:07] And then, seventh and finally, data isn't just about reporting anymore. Data is the engine for personalization. It is part of what makes AI so powerful. And it helps you make informed decisions.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:22] And here's something extra to consider. None of these shifts stands alone. They're intertwined. Personalization depends on data. AI depends on breaking down silos. Credential innovation ties directly to commoditization and learner expectations.

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Celisa Steele: [00:19:38] If you're wondering where to begin, start with leverage points. Think about places where a single change would support progress on multiple fronts for you. For example, investing in a data structure can help with AI, personalization, and strategic decision-making.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:56] Or piloting AI tools in one area of your content strategy might create momentum to rethink credentials or learner engagement.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:05] The key is to take some action and to not get overwhelmed and remain inactive. These shifts aren't a checklist, but they are signals. Your job is to interpret what these signals might mean for your mission, your learners, and your future.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:21] If you're listening to this, you're already a little ahead of the curve because the future isn't waiting for 2030 to arrive. It's unfolding now, and learning leaders have a real opportunity to help shape it.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:33] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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