



Social Learning Objects: From Content to Collective Learning

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 471

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] Most learning businesses are content-rich, turning out resources and courses with great regularity. But how much of that content actually sparks collective learning?

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:28] In today's conversation, we want to dig into the concept of social learning objects: the shared artifacts that anchor attention, create common language, and turn individual consumption into collective learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:41] Those artifacts can be process diagrams, other visuals, frameworks, podcasts, even events. The key is that they're generative rather than inert.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:52] Our thesis, for your consideration, is that being intentional about social learning objects can dramatically increase the impact of your learning offerings.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:04] So let's start by defining "social learning object" a bit more.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:09] In the early days of blogging, when people tended to talk a lot about social, and somebody picked up the idea that we were all focusing collectively, there was this idea of a social object. It might be a blog post. It might be a video. These days it might be a TikTok or whatever that everybody's focusing on. I took that idea of social object way back then and translated it into the learning world.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:38] So you added the "learning," the social learning object.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:42] That's right. That was my incredible innovation. It seemed a pretty natural leap to make because, when you think about people learning, an individual learning is usually going to be focused on some form of content for that learning. Content in and of itself is not learning, but your interaction with that content is what creates learning. And then, if you think about groups, teams, organizations, societies...

Celisa Steele: [00:02:08] By society you're thinking American society, French society, Swiss society, not professional societies like the Endocrine Society.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:17] I was using “society” broadly there, as in American society, but it also applies in the context of professional societies, trade associations, and membership bases. If there’s something common as a point of reference that meaningful discussion can be engaged in around, that becomes a focal point for learning. It becomes a social learning object.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:41] I’ll attempt to be a little bit more succinct and define “social learning object” as any artifact that multiple learners engage with for the purpose of learning. That’s what it is, but why do social learning objects matter for learning businesses?

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:01] Because, as a learning business, you should be thinking about how to get intentional about the social learning objects that you’re using with your audiences. What are you putting out and using in your online community, in a classroom, or wherever and however you’re engaging with an audience?

Celisa Steele: [00:03:20] Let’s talk about some things that are social learning objects. To your point, Jeff, as a learning business, organizations should be thinking about what do we have that is a social learning object? What do we have that could become a social learning object? What social learning objects might we create? And the idea is that a social learning object is a special kind of content.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:46] A social learning object as an artifact is content. But it’s content that’s geared towards a purpose, and that purpose is to get people to focus on and interact with it. People’s interaction around the social learning object is most likely to be a discussion, whether that happens in person or online, synchronously or asynchronously. People are going to be making meaning from that object, applying it to their situation, coming up with ways in which that object is meaningful to their situation.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:20] Let’s get even more concrete. One of the reasons that we’re talking about social learning objects today is because we ourselves aim to create this type of content. It’s the kind of content we use in consulting engagements and/or put out into the world more broadly, through a published report, a blog post, or through a Webinar or event. One specific example that may be familiar to a lot of our listeners is the Value Ramp.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:49] The good old Value Ramp. We created that many, many years ago to visualize the correlation, the relationship between price and value. As value goes up, price should go up, logically speaking. And all the Value Ramp is is two axes with a curve. The curve goes from low on the lower left to high on the upper right, and you can plot offerings in your learning portfolio along that curve. But, a big part of the value of the Value Ramp is that it’s not terribly complex as a visual or a concept, which makes it possible to put it on a screen, a flipchart, or a whiteboard and gather others in your organization to think about your catalog, your portfolio and see where your offerings fit within this simple concept.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:38] That plotting allows you to see if you are—or aren’t—telling a logical value story with your portfolio. It allows you to see where maybe there are some gaps along the curve. It lets you have conversation to uncover potential disagreement about where a particular product belongs on the Value Ramp.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:59] It's true that an individual, a single learning business leader or professional can use the Value Ramp on their own. And they should. But the real power, from our viewpoint, is that if you put it up—whether that's in a virtual meeting or a physical meeting room—and if you look at it together and start having a conversation about what's on that curve, what should be on that curve, what's not there, what do you need to change about it, that starts to generate new thinking, different thinking, learning that leads to whatever change you might make around how your Value Ramp is configured. That's just a single concrete example.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:44] I want to verbally highlight a word that you just used, Jeff. You said "generate." Again, that generative nature of the content is what makes it a social learning object. A more recent example of a social learning object that we've put out is a two-by-two matrix that we've called the Mission-Margin Matrix, so you end up with four quadrants.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:06] This has two axes: mission and margin. And you have low to high performance along each axis, which gives you four quadrants. Again, if you can get people in a room thinking about what in your portfolio falls into each of these quadrants, that can spark meaningful conversation and debate. What should we be doing more or less of? Questions about "Are you sure that's the quadrant where that product goes?" It can be very eye-opening to have people realize, "Wait—what? That product is losing that much money?" Those sorts of things.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:44] The simpler a social learning object is, the easier it is to use. Because, if you can just quickly draw those two axes in a curve or put up four quadrants, it doesn't take that long to explain the social learning object. You can just take two or three minutes, people get it conceptually, and that means that you can get to discussion and meaning-making faster. You can segue into thinking about the application to your specific situation quickly, and that's the real value of the social learning object. That said, you can have more complicated social learning objects. Our Learning Business Maturity Model is a slightly more complex social learning object.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:28] It is a bit more complex, but even it is easily explainable at a fundamental level, and people can get it pretty quickly. It's five domains and four stages (so we're away from that simpler two-by-two matrix structure), but, when people see it, they get the concept of maturity pretty quickly. They understand that there would be domains. They understand that there would be stages of progression. Then, yes, you need to go deeper to explain what it's all about, but, at its base level, the Learning Business Maturity Model is readily grasped.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:05] But there are some social learning objects that truly are more complex. I'm thinking of things like standards or competency models that organizations create, for example. Those can be social learning objects, but they may require a higher level of communication. And I think the less explanation, the better. Now you can't always simplify. Some things are complex, and you have to respect and recognize the complexity of the subject matter. But the main thing is to not overcomplicate it. When simplicity is possible, go with simplicity.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:40] And, if more explanation is needed, then the learning business putting that social learning object out into the world has to be very intentional in thinking about how does

that get communicated well so it becomes useful? Because what happens with so much content is it's inert. So think about how do we make things as simple as we can and no more complicated than necessary? And then how do we think about what's going to help people create connections?

Celisa Steele: [00:10:12] Basically, how do you make it generative? A lot of content that gets put out is not generative. It's declarative. It's inert.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:20] The danger in complexity is that, when something is very complex, it drives it towards being inert because nobody's going to engage with something that's really, really complex. There's probably some sort of social learning object to be made around that—simplicity versus generativity in your social learning objects.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:38] Probably. Maybe we'll create that social learning object at some point. But, for now, our point is, as a learning business, be intentional. When you're creating, whether that's a course or a conference or a publication or even an e-mail to your list of learners, really think about what's the purpose of this? What is the learning potential of this? How do we make accessing that learning potential no more complicated than necessary? What can we do to boost the generativity of it?

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:10] If it's a set of standards, maybe there's a set of questions that go along with the standards. Or something that you have to develop training workshops around—obviously social learning objects can be the center of more formal types of educational activities. You want to recognize them as such and build that right scaffolding, that right structure around them if they happen to be that complex and that rich and that deep. But you want to be thinking is there something you release along with that social learning object that helps the learning to happen around it?

Celisa Steele: [00:11:46] I was thinking about the role of questions. Questions will often be key to social learning objects and how they get used because questions are naturally part of dialogue, and discussion is what social learning objects are meant to prompt. If you continue with that example of standards or a competency model, where you're delineating a lot, it can feel very declarative and authoritative. "We know what's what. Here's the official, sanctioned way to think about this." All of that can make that content feel closed off and inert. There's not necessarily an invitation to interact with it. But, if that competency model or if the standards came with some questions that help you interact with the model or the standards and think about how they apply to you, then there is that invitation to engage, to generate some ideas, and to think about application.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:45] That makes me think about learning theory. You just used the term "declarative," and much of what gets put out in terms of content is declarative. It ties to declarative knowledge. No higher-level learning happens when there is no generative component to it. If you're dealing with things that people really do need to be able to learn, and that knowledge needs to be transferred, then there have to be the opportunities for application. There have to be opportunities for engagement with the content. You can think of the age-old Socratic method, which is usually engagement around a particular question or problem, and

that's then surrounded by a dialogue to help elicit the meaning of whatever that problem or question is in the circumstances in which it's being raised.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:33] One of the benefits of the more discursive approach to learning is that the value of discourse goes up the more you're in a VUCA environment—volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity. Many of the industries and professions that learning businesses are serving right now are dealing with uncertainty. They're feeling unsettled. Things aren't super clear. And so there's a bit of a question around what can you still offer that is supportive of the kinds of discussions that need to happen, even if you can't offer an answer? A social learning object can help.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:16] I want to come back to the idea of a social learning object being succinct, and that it's often visual. Social learning objects take the format of visuals a great deal of the time because, again, you can put it up on a slide, on a flipchart, and get people to understand it conceptually quickly, at a glance. There's an invitation there for listeners to be thinking about what your learning business offers in terms of content. Where might you translate some of the key pieces of your intellectual property or core content into a process visual or diagram that helps convey a concept and helps to structure discussion?

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:00] A social learning object gives people that common point of reference that's easy to access. A visual is one of the most obvious ways to do it. There's a reason that your average consultant walks into the room and draws a four-quadrant matrix all the time—because that can easily illustrate a point and get dialogue going. But it doesn't have to be a visual. It's worth pointing out that we started the Leading Learning Podcast as a social learning object. It was a lead-up to the first face-to-face event we held many years ago—the Leading Learning Symposium—with the idea that we were going to have speakers who were going to be at that symposium, and we could do some pre-content. We were going to do some pre-content on the topics that we were going to be covering at the event, with the idea that attendees at the event would be able to listen to this beforehand and have a common point of reference, at least a small set of shared knowledge coming into the event.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:56] We were trying to level the playing field, or the learning field in this case. How successful that was, I don't know—it's been over a decade at this point. But it has led to this podcast continuing for many years.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:11] That's right. You hear us say all the time, "Pass this on to your team. Listen to this with your team." We get people who tell us that they have done just that. They have team members listen to a particular episode or parts of an episode and then have some dialogue around that, which is exactly what we're talking about when we talk about a social learning object.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:33] And part of what we were trying to do with the podcast initially, in tying it to that event, was to help some with prior knowledge. We know, especially when we get into working with adults, that learners bring a significant amount of prior knowledge, differing levels of prior knowledge, differing levels of experience to a learning situation or, for that matter, any situation. And so there's value in the social learning object providing some

shared language and some shared concepts. That way, even if three people are bringing three different perspectives and three differing levels of fluency in a particular subject, if you put up that Mission-Margin Matrix or the Value Ramp, then whatever they know about portfolios, that social learning object is helping to frame the discussion. And that can be very powerful because otherwise sometimes you get a group together, and you say, "We're going to talk about strategy," or "We're going to talk about portfolio makeup," and everyone has a different way that they're going to approach that. But a social learning object provides a frame that can help you focus together.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:37] Yes, a social learning object can change the dynamic. It changes the discussion in the room to introduce and then have something that can be a focal point, a common point of reference. Whether you're talking about a customer base or you're talking about a membership base, a lot of people who are listening and are representatives of the types of organizations that are in the Leading Learning audience, often you're looking to build a sense of community. You're looking to build a sense of cohesion and identity across an audience—or at least tap into that and help sustain that community in whatever profession or industry or whatever it is that you're serving. And having these kinds of common points of reference is really helpful—I'll argue essential—for that. If people don't have enough or substantial enough points of reference, it can hinder their individual or smaller group learning, and then, across a broader body, the broader audience that you're trying to serve, you don't have enough commonality to really accomplish big things. So, if you want to lead learning in your profession or industry (which is what we talk about all the time), you have to have some baseline commonality to build around and to lead people forward from. The whole concept of a social learning object is incredibly important and central to this whole idea of leading learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:02] And we can take this out to a broader societal view as well. There are plenty of social critiques out there right now that say a lot of what's happening in the United States is because we lack cohesion at this point.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:17] Right. We're getting deep and philosophical now. We used to have a lot more commonalities societally, in these social objects that we were all focused on. Some of us can remember back to three TV channels and the evening news. People were focused on the same body of content and stories and had the same points of conversation. And now, today, the whole media landscape, the whole social object landscape is completely fragmented.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:44] There are obviously upsides to that surge in options. People can do what they want to do, you be you, all that sort of stuff. There's a lot positive to that. But what goes along with that is that there's not that same amount of social cohesion. There's not the shared prior knowledge that people can bring to discussions. The result is that you end up with a lot of people talking past each other or getting angry at each other.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:10] So there are bigger, broader philosophical and societal implications to this whole concept we're discussing. But bringing it back down to just serving a specific community or set of people, that's much more manageable, and you can be intentional about this and focus

on social objects that are going to be meaningful in terms of helping to generate learning and helping to generate change in whatever audience you're serving.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:39] And one last point that I'll call out is attention. We've talked about focus, we've talked about shared frames of reference, and those hint at attention, but I want to call out attention specifically.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:53] We try to reflect this in our gatherings and events. I feel like the best events I attend and the organizations I see that are most successful with gatherings are very intentional about how they're focusing attention when they bring people together. Because a lot of this really is about focusing attention. Whether an event is organized around a concrete and actionable theme or there are actual artifacts that are the focus of the event, if you've got those there, and if you're particularly focused on doing things like getting teams to events, if you can get teams from an organization to an event and have them focused around those same points of reference, those same social learning objects, your events can have an impact that ripples throughout the field and industry you're serving and the organizations within that field or industry.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:52] Social learning objects don't have to be elaborate or expensive. What matters is that they give people something shared to think with, talk about, and apply.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:03] And that requires intention. It means asking not just what content are we producing, but how are we focusing attention, and what kind of interactions are we inviting?

Celisa Steele: [00:22:15] Whether it's a framework, a visual, a podcast episode, an event, the key question is always does this object generate learning?

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:24] If you can design more of your learning offerings to be generative rather than inert, you don't just increase engagement—you increase the likelihood that real learning and real change actually happen.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:36] Be sure to visit leadinglearning.com/episode471 for show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:44] If you enjoy the Leading Learning Podcast, please share this episode or another with a colleague or co-worker you feel would appreciate and get value from it.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:54] Treat it as a social learning object, and discuss it with them.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:57] Thanks again—and we'll see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by Moarn]