



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 251

Celisa Steele (00:00):

I think it's not an exaggeration to say that there's a chance in these disruptive times for learning businesses to positively impact society, to make the world a better place.

Jeff Cobb (00:15):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:16):

I'm Celisa Steele. And this is the Leading Learning Podcast. We paused the Leading Learning Podcast after we released episode 250 in the summer of 2020 because we felt a pull to explore topics and ideas that call out for deeper exploration.

Jeff Cobb (00:38):

Now we're moving the podcast to a series approach rather than single self-contained one-off episodes. With our new approach, over the course of several episodes, seven in this case, we'll explore a topic from a variety of viewpoints, drawing on multiple interviews, as well as offering our own thoughts and providing context for the conversations with others and connecting the dots.

Celisa Steele (01:02):

In this first series, we're tackling the subject of the learning business in disruptive times, aka the times we're living in now in 2020. While our focus and point of view is on the current moment, what the series covers will be useful in future times of disruption. We can learn from the past and the present and apply those lessons to shape the future and respond to its demands and opportunities.

Jeff Cobb (01:31):

Celisa, we're calling this series, the learning business in disruptive times. So let's talk here at the outset of episode 251 about the idea of disruption. And I'd be interested, what does that mean to you?

Celisa Steele (01:45):

I think I'm pretty happy with something close to the dictionary definition. Disruption is a break in the normal course of some activity or process. So for me, disruptive times are periods where the normal course is thrown off. And now I have a question for you, Jeff, do you see disruption as a good thing or a bad thing?

Jeff Cobb (02:10):

Well, it is a good question. I see disruption as a thing, not inherently good or bad. So depending on what process or activity is disrupted, it could be bad or it could be good or something else.

So disrupting someone stealing my credit card information, for instance, that would be a good thing for me. Disrupting my meditation in the morning, that wouldn't be so good. Disrupting my planned evening of quiet reading with a surprise party might bring elements both of pleasure—so I get time with friends and family—and elements of displeasure—the loss of making progress in a good book.

Celisa Steele (02:51):

Ah, so we're beginning to get into types of disruption. You mentioned theft, interrupted meditation, surprise parties. And I know you and I had four categories of disruption in mind as we framed this series: (1) the pandemic, (2) systemic racism, (3) the economic situation, and (4) political contentiousness and uncertainty in a major election year.

Jeff Cobb (03:20):

And so I think we all know all too well now that the pandemic is clearly a force disrupting living and working worldwide. According to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center, as we're recording, there are more than 35 million confirmed cases of coronavirus worldwide, and we're approaching 7.5 million confirmed cases in the U.S. Worldwide, more than one million have died. In the U.S., over 209,000 have died. Those are sobering numbers.

Celisa Steele (03:57):

They are. As a point of reference—I think sometimes going back in history can be helpful for understanding the present—if we look back to the 1918 flu pandemic, which was the most severe pandemic in recent history (that's according to the Centers for Disease Control), during that pandemic, 500 million people, so about a third of the world's population at the time, became infected. So that's 500 million versus the 7.5 million today. And during that 1918 flu pandemic, the number of deaths was estimated to be at least 50 million worldwide with about 675,000 occurring in the U.S. So those numbers are more dire than what we're seeing at this point. But, of course, the COVID-19 pandemic is unrolling as we speak. And we don't know what the final numbers will be. We only know that they will be higher than the numbers that you just shared, Jeff.

Jeff Cobb (04:58):

And then systemic racism is another disruption that we had in mind as we framed this series, and many have likened racism and COVID calling them both pandemics.

Celisa Steele (05:10):

Yeah. I mean, signs saying "racism is a pandemic" were seen at the Black Lives Matter protests that surged this summer. Between May 26—so the day after George Floyd's killing—and August 22, the Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project (ACLED) records over 7,750 demonstrations linked to the Black Lives Matter movement in all 50 states and Washington, DC.

Jeff Cobb (05:41):

And *The New York Times* reported that on June 6, half a million people turned out in nearly 550 places across the U.S. That's half a million people protesting in a single day.

Celisa Steele (05:54):

And *The New York Times* also reported in July on four polls that suggested 15 million to 26 million people in the U.S. participated in demonstrations over the death of George Floyd, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and others this summer. And as the *Times* points out, those

figures make this summer's protest the largest movement in the country's history. The *Times* quotes Deva Woodly, who teaches politics, and she says that the civil rights marches of the 1960s were much smaller in number. All the protests in that period if you add them up would amount to hundreds of thousands of people protesting, not the millions of people that we're seeing this summer.

Jeff Cobb (06:38):

And so the scale of the response to racism that we're experiencing right now is just unprecedented. And, as with the pandemic, we're not dealing with something that's done. Demonstrations aren't over; they're still happening, and they're probably unlikely to let up anytime very soon. Now, the third disruption, the economic situation, that's also ongoing. The pandemic plunged the global economy into a recession. The lockdowns and shutdowns took their toll, but there are already signs that the U.S. economy is recovering. In a MarketWatch article, for example, the St. Louis Fed president James Bullard says the U.S. is out of the recession, but he uses an analogy to explain our situation. It's like the U.S. economy has been in the hospital and it's now out, but it's still recovering.

Celisa Steele (07:32):

And I think it's really important to note that the impact of the recession has been unevenly distributed, not just across countries and regions, which is true, but across types of people. *The Washington Post* recently reported on the Coronavirus recessions in equality, it's been "a mild setback for those at or near the top" economically while those at the bottom have been delivered "a recession-like blow." And that's historically the case—the rich can usually ride out an economic downturn more easily than the poor—but the *Post* found that this most recent recession is the most unequal in modern U.S. history.

Jeff Cobb (08:14):

Now the fourth disruption we have in mind is political contentiousness and uncertainty in a major election year. In a poll conducted by *The Economist* and YouGov at the end of September in response to the question "How much confidence do you have that the 2020 presidential election will be held fairly?" 28 percent of registered voters said that they had only a little confidence or none at all. And voters who identify as Republicans have less confidence than those who identify as Democrats: 30 percent of Republicans in that poll have only a little confidence or none at all versus 24 percent of Democrats.

Celisa Steele (09:03):

And I'll quote another poll. This one was done by the Pew Research Center, and it speaks to how divided our political parties are becoming. Roughly four in ten registered voters in the Trump camp and the Biden camp say that they do not have a single close friend who supports the other major party candidate. And fewer than a quarter say they have more than a few friends who do. And, again, that's based on a survey from Pew that was conducted in July and August.

Jeff Cobb (09:36):

And, of course, this too is an evolving issue and situation. Just a couple of days before we're recording, President Trump was diagnosed with COVID-19. The complications and new twists are just stacking up to make this an unprecedented election season.

Celisa Steele (10:02):

We had four categories of disruption in mind, as we framed this series: the pandemic, systemic racism, the economic situation, and political contentiousness and uncertainty in a major election year. What do you think of those categories of disruption, Jeff? Are they inherently a good thing or a bad thing?

Jeff Cobb (10:24):

Well, again, a lot depends on your perspective. The pandemic is like the definition of disruption. It's upended things and thrown off normal activities and processes. And while the coronavirus on its own certainly strikes me as a negative thing, I have experienced some positives as a result—a somewhat slower pace to life, for example, brought about by activities like kids' sports being canceled for a time. And I think that's true with the economic situation too. It really depends on your position. Certain businesses are thriving. I'm sure people listening know that online learning designers and developers, for example, and virtual conference providers are experiencing something of a boom right now.

Celisa Steele (11:10):

Yes, definitely. And the other two categories of disruption that I mentioned, systemic racism and political contentiousness, those both, at least as phrased, as I just mentioned them, are negative, but I could see them having positive effects. The Black Lives Matter protests and their coverage in the media may be educating more folks about systemic racism and the need to take action to dismantle it. And political contentiousness and the uncertainty surrounding the elections this year may push individuals who sat out past elections, maybe it's pushing them to vote this year, and that would be a positive in my book. Because disruption isn't good or bad and because point of view matters so much. We sought out folks to have conversations with who we felt could comment on one or more of the four—or even other—categories of disruption that we're all feeling personally and experiencing also as learning businesses.

Jeff Cobb (12:13):

Four conversations are part of this series. I spoke with Seth Khan of Visionary Leadership. Seth has been on the podcast three times before talking about leadership, innovation, and collective impact. We reached out to him again because he's a thoughtful, thought-provoking guy, and we knew he'd have an informed and nuanced view of these current disruptive times in part because he's proactively sought out conversations with leaders. He undertook a 100 CEOs in 100 days initiative back in the early days of the pandemic. And that's certainly something we talk to him about, but Seth also has a deep history with these issues that we go into to bring his really unique and deeply felt perspective to the times that we're experiencing right now.

Celisa Steele (13:06):

I spoke with Shilpa Alimchandani. She's also been on the podcast before, in an episode that focused on implicit bias. Shilpa is a consultant specializing in diversity, equity, and inclusion. She's very hands-on with instructional design, with facilitation of learning, and with coaching, and her goal in working with organizations is to address diversity, equity, and inclusion so that it can make a lasting change. She's clear about not wanting to be part of a DEI undertaking if it's going to be a Band-Aid approach. She wants to engage when there's an opportunity for long-term change because that's what it takes to dismantle systemic racism, to really wrestle with bias. It takes commitment over time, and that makes complete sense of course. Change requires learning, and we all know that real, deep learning takes time and repetition and practice, not just a one-off workshop.

Jeff Cobb (14:09):

And I talked with Tracey Steiner, senior vice president for education and training at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, or NRECA, a trade association based in Arlington, Virginia. I've had the good fortune to know Tracey for a number of years now, as well as the opportunity to work with her and her team at NRECA. She's someone who's always very proactive and very strategic about navigating challenging circumstances. And because of what NRECA does, because of who it is as an organization, she's in the position of helping a far-flung network of rural community-based cooperatives successfully make their way through these disruptive times.

Celisa Steele (14:54):

I talked with Shawn Boynes, executive director of the American Association for Anatomy. As the leader of triple A, Shawn is on the front lines of an organization in the learning business, actively working through how best to respond to and serve its learners in these disruptive times. Shawn came up through the learning line of business, overseeing professional development and continuing education and learning at other associations before becoming an ED, so learning is a passion for him and an area where he has deep experience. Shawn is also an individual, of course—as all the interviewees are—he's an individual figuring out what it means to live in these disruptive times. After George Floyd's killing, Shawn and three other Black executives started a podcast called Texts to Table, and that podcast helps examine and share what it's like to live and lead in a Black body in the U.S. in these times. You'll get to hear from all four of these folks—Seth, Shilpa, Tracey, and Shawn—in upcoming episodes in this series.

Jeff Cobb (16:10):

We see disruption as an important topic to address on the podcast because learning always happens in context, a critical point for all learning businesses to always have in mind. And the broader context for all of us, including our learners has changed significantly. And, of course, that can have impact, significant impact, on a learning business in multiple ways.

Celisa Steele (16:34):

Yeah, so these disruptive times are having concrete impact on learning businesses. If we look at the pandemic, for example, COVID meant a really swift shift away from in-person learning to online learning. And with that swift shift came all the issues, from ensuring the quality of the learning experience, to challenges related to participation and access, to questions about business models and financial implications. And the changing nature of work is producing an urgent need for new learning in many contexts. In the medical and the healthcare fields, for example, there's been an urgent need for learning related to how to deliver health services remotely.

Jeff Cobb (17:19):

And then systemic racism is taking a toll on staff and learners. And that may be particularly true for Black staff and learners. It's hard to focus on learning when an existential threat like racism is top of mind. And this also relates, of course, to fostering engagement in our offerings, a topic we've talked and written about quite a bit. Safety, we know, is one of the fundamental conditions for engagement. As learning businesses, we have to examine and question the extent to which our offerings support an environment with which people of color can identify and in which they feel welcome and in which they feel safe. And this applies to the marketing of those experiences, to the actual learning experiences. And then, by extension, we need to examine the diversity of our staff and our subject matter experts and presenters.

Celisa Steele (18:16):

The economic situation is impacting what learners can spend, it's impacting what learning businesses can develop and provide, and it's impacting what learning businesses can charge. There are a lot of free offerings out there in the pandemic world. And the economic situation may alter the emphasis in our learning portfolios. What learning experiences do we need to provide to help people re-skill, upskill, and just in general, navigate successfully through economically uncertain times?

Jeff Cobb (18:50):

And then political contentiousness and uncertainty make it hard to plan for the future when so much seems unclear. Now, depending on the focus of your learning experiences, the contentiousness may even make it harder than it's been before to address certain topics and issues in a productive way. Learners may be more quote "dug in" on their points of view on either end of the political spectrum and less willing to engage with diverse viewpoints, less willing to have that openness of mind that's so important to true learning. Organizations and their subject matter experts and presenters may find themselves unexpectedly in more of an adversarial position with segments of their audience, a position where making demands may replace engaging in dialogue and may create an atmosphere in which the openness necessary to learning is just diminished.

Celisa Steele (19:45):

And, of course, it's not just each kind of disruption on its own. It's really the swirl of all these kinds of disruption. The quick pivots to online learning and online conferences that were necessitated by the pandemic are, of course, complicated by the economic situation. The political contentiousness in the U.S. is focused in part on systemic racism. Systemic racism means that Black bodies in this country are more susceptible to the pandemic and more likely to suffer the economic disadvantages of the pandemic. So, again, it's not just one of these particular categories of disruption, but it's all of them intertwined, interacting together.

Jeff Cobb (20:28):

And, of course, there's plenty to be said here about what it means to lead learning and how important taking broader context into account is for that. And that's something that we have talked about before, and that will come up in the context of these interviews and our perspectives on the disruptions that we're encountering right now. Related to that, I think there's also something to be said about the importance of the culture of learning an organization fosters in collaboration with its audience. Have you created a culture that can survive and thrive in these sorts of disruptive times in which your audience is able to engage, not just with the topics that you're teaching, but with that broader context that we're talking about and how the knowledge, the skills that you offer apply in that broader context?

Celisa Steele (21:20):

So there's an opportunity—and, I think, arguably a responsibility—for learning businesses to not just help learners acquire new skills and knowledge but to also help them cultivate the behaviors and attitudes that enable them to navigate these disruptive times with an open and receptive mind and an ability to engage with and apply learning in context. And organizations that have a strong culture of learning will be able to do that, and that's going to benefit their learners. And then those learners will benefit the people that they interact with. And so, I think, it's not an exaggeration to say that there's a chance in these disruptive times for learning businesses to positively impact society, to make the world a better place.

Jeff Cobb (22:16):

Because disruption isn't inherently good or bad. And because point of view matters so much when seeking to understand disruption and its effect, we want to invite you to reflect and we offer four questions. First, what are the types of disruption you and the learners you serve are experiencing now? How are you responding personally and in your learning business to those types of disruption?

Celisa Steele (22:44):

How can you assess the effectiveness of your response? What else do you need to do to respond?

Jeff Cobb (22:53):

You can find show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode251, along with a transcript and a variety of resources, including those questions.

Celisa Steele (23:04):

At leadinglearning.com/episode251, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss the remaining episodes in this series, we encourage you to subscribe, and subscribing also helps us get some data on the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb (23:21):

We'd be grateful if you'd take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts. Celisa and I personally appreciate it, and reviews and ratings help the podcast show up when people search on content for leading a learning business. And we'd also like to know what you think about this new approach to Leading Learning. So go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review and rating.

Celisa Steele (23:43):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode251 you'll find links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (23:55):

Thanks again. And we'll see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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