



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 254

Celisa Steele (00:00):

"I'm interested in the people who love the world more, and in what they have to tell us.... Because what we do begins with what we believe we can do. It begins with being open to the possibilities and interested in the complexities." That's the end of that Solnit passage, but I think being open to the possibilities, being interested in the complexities—I mean, that sounds like a good definition of a lifelong learner to me.

Jeff Cobb (00:33):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:34):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb (00:41):

Welcome to episode 254 of the Leading Learning Podcast, the midpoint in our seven-part series on the learning business in disruptive times. Celisa and I set up the series in episode 251, and then we ran two interviews. I talked with Seth Kahan, founder of Visionary Leadership, for episode 252.

Celisa Steele (01:02):

And I spoke with Shilpa Alimchandani, a diversity, equity, and inclusion strategist with more than two decades' experience, for episode 253. Coming up later in the series still are conversations with Tracey Steiner, senior vice president for education and training at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association, and Shawn Boynes, executive director of the American Association for Anatomy. Before we get to those conversations with Tracey and Shawn, though, we want to devote this episode to reflecting on what we've learned so far from talking with Seth and Shilpa, checking in on what's new as the pandemic, racial justice, the economy, and the election are all evolving and changing situations, and looking at the practical implications of what all this means for how a learning business might survive, and even thrive in these disruptive times, these times when the normal course of activities and processes are thrown off.

Jeff Cobb (02:04):

At the end of the first episode in this series, we offered four questions to you to get you, the listener, engaged and thinking about your learning business. Those questions were: 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? How can you assess the effectiveness of your response? What else do you need to do to respond?

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode254.*

Jeff Cobb (02:32):

Our hope is that you spent a little time thinking about your answers, maybe even engaged with a colleague or more to discuss and share, and perhaps, as you listened to what Seth and Shilpa had to say, you saw new facets or nuances that added to your understanding of these disruptive times and the implications for your learning business, the possibilities and the complexities. If you haven't yet engaged with these four questions, there is, of course, still time. Reflecting on these questions will still be useful and productive, and we always try to model the desired behavior here, to walk the walk and not just talk the talk, so we want to revisit the questions, and we'll start with, "What are the types of disruption you and the learners you serve are experiencing now?"

Celisa Steele (03:20):

We had four categories of disruption in mind as we framed this series. One, the pandemic. Two, systemic racism. Three, the economic situation. And, four, political contentiousness and uncertainty in a major election year, and I was satisfied that all four categories came up overtly in your conversation with Seth, Jeff.

Jeff Cobb (03:43):

And in your conversation with Shilpa, Celisa, the pandemic and systemic racism come up overtly, and I heard shadings of the economic situation and politics in what she shared.

Celisa Steele (03:54):

Definitely, and I noticed that Seth and Shilpa both brought up equity issues beyond questions of racial equity. Seth remarked on what he sees as, quote, "a new level of depth and understanding of the African American experience and how it is a metaphor for all marginalized people," end quote, so he's thinking about people with disabilities, Native Americans, immigrants and others, and he thinks that progress on the racial equity front will "lift up many boats," as he put it.

Celisa Steele (04:26):

And then Shilpa, in her work, engages with diversity, equity, and inclusion broadly, and that diversity includes not just race, but ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, age, religion, socioeconomic status, ability, disability, et cetera. And I find Seth's and Shilpa's connecting of racial inequity to other types of inequity useful, not to diminish or dilute the U.S.'s history of inequity towards Blacks, but to remind us how learning in one area can be extrapolated and applied in other areas. In the learning field, this is the idea of how powerful prior knowledge and schemas in the service of germane cognitive load can be for adult learners. When we come to understand one thing, like the roots of racial inequality in the U.S., it can help us understand related topics, like sexism, discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation, and so on.

Jeff Cobb (05:30):

Yes, and Seth also raised climate change as a type of disruption we're facing now. That wasn't in the four categories of disruption we enumerated, but I heartily concur with Seth that it's a major issue causing disruption.

Celisa Steele (05:44):

Oh, me too. I think climate change is a major disruptor, and I think it's one that many in the events industry, for example, haven't yet fully appreciated and accounted for in preparing for the future.

Jeff Cobb (05:57):

And I found it interesting that in the conversations that he's having with 100 CEOs, he's seeing consensus around climate change. He's seeing those CEOs in agreement that climate change is a major issue that has to be dealt with, and so it's not a question of whether to respond to climate change but how.

Celisa Steele (06:16):

Right, and I'm guessing it's not so much that observation on its own that you found interesting, but that he hasn't seen clear consensus on the systemic racism front, that he's had some conversations with CEOs who say, "No, that's not impacting me."

Jeff Cobb (06:32):

Yeah, you're right, that is the part I found interesting, and it ties, I think, to what we talked about in the first episode in the series. Disruption isn't inherently good or bad, and disruption, or the effects of disruption, aren't evenly distributed. The current economy just isn't bad for everyone, and some people don't personally suffer because of systemic racism, or at least they don't recognize that they do, and so they don't necessarily see a reason to engage on that topic.

Jeff Cobb (07:02):

Now, let's move on to the second question: "How are you responding personally and in your learning business to those types of disruption?"

Celisa Steele (07:12):

In talking with Shilpa, I heard her say that it can feel "overwhelming" to be someone working on diversity, equity, and inclusion now, and that was a reminder for me that responses to that question, "How are you responding personally and in your learning business to those types of disruption?," the responses to that question are at least twofold. I mean, there's the gut-level reaction, and then there's the choice, the action you choose to take. But being tuned in to your emotions is important. Emotions are real, and they impact what you feel capable and able to do, and I think there's a kind of corollary between emotions and bias.

Celisa Steele (07:53):

Shilpa talked about biases often being unseen, unnoticed, and I think the same goes for emotions. But if we tune in and notice them, then we can truly choose how to act. We can work to recognize negative bias and negative emotions, and, by recognizing them, we're then able to make better choices and decisions. And I think Shilpa said it really well, and so I'd like to quote her, she said, "We can't erase...bias. [But w]e can notice it. We can interrupt it. We can make different choices. We can—in that pause between the thought and the action—choose a different way."

Jeff Cobb (08:37):

And Seth too talked about emotions and the dark side of these disruptions. He's been doing a lot of reading about racism, and, as he sees it, that's often not easy stuff.

Celisa Steele (08:49):

Well, yeah, I remember he called it “traumatic” in fact.

Jeff Cobb (08:52):

But it’s the kind of hard work that’s worth doing. It’s the hard work of learning, frankly; it’s the effort that leads to learning and change. And in terms of how he’s responding personally to the disruptions, he talked about reading, as we were just saying, reading to learn and understand, and he talked about meditation, and really both reading and meditation, I’d say, have also been incredibly important to me in this time. They’re both a source of potential insight, and, at the same time, a source of solace, really.

Celisa Steele (09:24):

And reading’s been important for me. I typically read, in my free time, poetry and fiction primarily, but over the last six months or so, I’ve added more nonfiction to my reading diet, particularly books that deal with systemic racism. I’d love to be a better meditator than I am—and I think if I were a better meditator, I probably wouldn’t even use a term like “better”—but for me, meditation is a nascent practice, but I have found a lot of solace in yoga the last few months.

Celisa Steele (09:57):

Yoga is, for me, a kind of moving meditation. I went a few weeks without yoga when the studios around here closed in March, but, since then, I reconnected with my teacher, and she’s using Zoom for live online sessions, and, while I didn’t expect it, it’s been surprisingly satisfying to do yoga online in that context. Now, of course, as someone who’s been not just involved in online learning since the late ‘90s, but a proponent of online learning, I probably shouldn’t have been as surprised as I was at how good online yoga can be. And I know that Shilpa shared that she’s been, quote, “really heartened to see just...how deep the learning can be using virtual tools and platforms,” end quote, and so I know I’m not the only one being pleasantly surprised.

Jeff Cobb (10:47):

And Shilpa also mentioned that she hopes that important things, like, for example, conversations about and work on diversity, equity, and inclusion, don’t get put off indefinitely because of the current disruptive times, that we don’t use that as an excuse, and she seemed really excited about the possibilities for dealing with DEI issues, even in virtual formats.

Celisa Steele (11:13):

And she also mentioned being choosier in her work, turning down some DEI jobs when the organization didn’t seem committed to change and seemed to be thinking more about one-off workshops. And I think that that’s a common thread for many folks during these times. A lot was taken off our plates with lockdowns and physical distancing, and so I think many folks are now trying to be careful about what they put back on their plate, being somewhat choosy about it.

Jeff Cobb (11:44):

And then, of course, others have been trying to find a way to get something onto their plate. Seth talked about his business dropping to zero very quickly, but, in true Seth style, rather than

sitting around passively and waiting it out, he took action. He set out to talk to 100 CEOs to get really up close to the problem, to understand what they were facing. So he did a lot for free for a time, but it was very valuable to his own learning and understanding, and he was able to make it valuable to others as well by bringing CEOs together, connecting people so they could share and learn.

Celisa Steele (12:23):

And I think Seth's 100 CEOs initiative is brilliant, in fact. I guess it's not even technically his idea—he borrowed it from someone else in another field. But I think it's the kind of simple, powerful idea that can have really broad application. I mean, what might a learning business find out by talking to 100 learners in the next six months?

Jeff Cobb (12:45):

A lot, and, I mean, I can imagine that the market insight and relationship-building alone would be amazing. In fact, I don't even have to imagine that because we've done hundreds of those types of conversations over the years on behalf of organizations that we've worked for, and they always offer up tremendous insights that the organization can then take action on now. Obviously Seth started his 100 CEOs initiative early on in the pandemic, but this is a fluid situation we're in—we're dealing with ongoing and evolving types of disruption—so even now, starting an initiative like that at this point would still yield incredible insight into what learners are really dealing with personally and professionally and how you might best connect with them, serve them, and support them.

Celisa Steele (13:36):

Yeah, we are absolutely in a fluid situation, and so I think it's worth noting some of what's changed since we spoke with Seth and Shilpa in the first part of September 2020. I'm thinking in particular of President Trump's announcement at the National Archives on September 17th—so that happened after our conversations with Seth and Shilpa. At the National Archives, Trump made an announcement establishing a national commission to promote patriotic education, and then on September 22nd he followed that up with an executive order on "Combating Race and Sex Stereotyping"

Celisa Steele (14:16):

And then on October 7th, Susan Robertson—she's the CEO of the American Society of Association Executives, and I know she came up in your conversation with Seth, Jeff, because she's one of the 100 CEOs he's talked with since the pandemic—on October 7th, she sent on behalf of ASAE a letter to President Trump, quote, "condemn[ing] recent White House directives intended to ban diversity and anti-racism training in the federal workplace and retaliate against those that prioritize and value a fair and inclusive workplace that is respectful of all employees," end quote.

Jeff Cobb (14:54):

And, of course, I mean, I'll avoid getting political here, but Trump certainly has interesting perspectives on what counts as a patriotic education and what "combating stereotypes" means, definitely not the same thing that Susan Robertson and ASAE would mean. And, of course, that's some changes that have happened. Who knows what will change before this episode airs, and before you, dear listener, are hearing this? We do know that this episode will air on Election Day in the United States.

Celisa Steele (15:25):

And we know that early voting has hit record numbers. By October 21st, at least 31 million votes had been cast in the U.S. 2020 general election—that's 31 million compared to just 5.6 million at the same time in 2016. And then as of October 25th, more ballots have been cast already in 2020 than were cast pre-election in 2016, and that was with more than a week to go before Election Day. So I think it's pretty clear that the pandemic plus the contentious political environment are getting voters out in unprecedented numbers, at least early voters.

Jeff Cobb (16:04):

What we also know is that it's unlikely that we'll know the outcome of the presidential and other races by the end of Election Day. The contentious environment and the regulations around when and for how long mail-in ballots can be counted and legal challenges mean that we may be waiting quite a while.

Celisa Steele (16:24):

Shilpa brought up unlearning, and I think these disruptive times have made unlearning so important. So many expectations based on how things usually work, or how things used to work—like knowing the winners on Election Day—those expectations are being upended. So I think there's a need for beginner's mind, to borrow that Zen phrase.

Jeff Cobb (16:58):

The third question is, "How can you assess the effectiveness of your response?" And that will depend at least in part on what you're doing to respond to the disruptions, the measure, the assessment, ideally being tailored to the actions you're taking.

Celisa Steele (17:14):

One broadly applicable thing we can say, though, is that learning businesses should be looking at not only lagging indicators but also leading indicators. Lagging indicators would be things like how many enrollments did you get for a new online course or how many registrations for that virtual conference that replaced your usually in-person event. Those are lagging indicators because they're after the fact. It's after you have the online course designed, developed, and rolled out, that's when you see enrollment numbers, and it's after the virtual conference is planned that you see registration numbers.

Jeff Cobb (17:51):

The leading indicators, on the other hand, would give you earlier input on how successful a product or service, or any effort, really, might be for your learning business. So pre-selling would certainly fall in this camp, but I also think that something like a 100 learners initiative modeled on Seth's 100 CEOs initiative could really yield some useful information and ideas.

Celisa Steele (18:15):

Similarly, I think doing an honest assessment of how inclusive and diverse your facilitators and trainers and subject matter experts are could be a really great activity in this area, and I know that's something that Shilpa raised and suggested.

Jeff Cobb (18:32):

So another generality likely to be true for most learning businesses is that in addition to looking at a mix of leading and lagging indicators, you'll probably also want to be looking at qualitative, anecdotal information, as well as hard, quantifiable numbers when you're assessing.

Celisa Steele (18:50):

And so, finally, let's touch on the fourth question we posed in the first episode of this series: "What else do you need to do to respond?" And the answers here will hopefully come from and be grounded in your answers to the last question, that is, based on an honest assessment of how what you're doing to respond to these disruptive times is going, then you'll figure out what you need to do instead or in addition.

Jeff Cobb (19:18):

Or what you'll need to drop.

Celisa Steele (19:20):

Well, that's a good point. Sunsetting should be an option, and I think that gets back to that idea of being choosy about what gets put on the plate.

Jeff Cobb (19:30):

And as a particular area perhaps worth probing, I know that Seth brought up leadership a couple of times in his conversation, and disruptive times, of course, call for good leadership—they heighten the need for it. They can also complicate the execution of good leadership. The pivot to virtual thing has been hard for some people to lead in. The kind of input you get when you're in close physical proximity, and you're in the office, you're really working up close to people, that's different than what you get in a work-from-home situation. And so for learning businesses that offer products and services specifically in leadership, there's a chance to revisit those offerings and make sure they speak to the current situation.

Jeff Cobb (20:15):

And then for learning businesses in general, there's also the need to assess internal leadership during this disruptive time and look at what needs to change and to be done in these disruptive times so that the organization internally is working well and so it can respond to and even be proactive in supporting its learners and leading its learners.

Celisa Steele (20:38):

I would say that more reading is an answer for me to this "What else do you need to do to respond?" question—or if not an answer directly, it's a way of arriving at answers. Reading is kind of my default, my go-to for most anything, and so I know what I have to watch is making sure that I don't stop at reading, that I take action too. And I did decide to volunteer to be a poll observer during this election season, and there's been something soothing in volunteering. It's helped me quell, or at least channel some of my anxiety in this time of political disruption and contentiousness.

Jeff Cobb (21:19):

One of these days, we may need to provide some background on why reading is so important to us because I think both of us would tend to say more reading in answer to just about any problem that we encounter, but we're both big believers that reading, when it's done well,

when it's done right, A, can be hard, as Seth indicated, but B, it can be transformative, and it really can prepare you for the changes that you need to make and to understand the changes that need to be made more broadly.

Jeff Cobb (21:54):

And so with that in mind, maybe let's each share a bit about something we've read that's been helpful to us in these disruptive times, and I'm happy to start because what's on my mind is a book that actually came up in my conversation with Seth, as it turned out he'd read it too, and it's called *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons for Our Own* by Eddie S. Glaude Jr., and it was published this summer. It's an excellent book for helping to understand the current political situation in this country and for helping to understand systemic racism.

Jeff Cobb (22:35):

The book is a mix of history, biography, personal essay, memoir (Glaude draws on his own personal story at times), philosophy, political commentary, social criticism—it's got a little bit of everything in there. And it very clearly touches on two of the four types of the disruption that you and I had in mind when we were framing this series, Celisa, and I would recommend it to anyone who wants a much deeper understanding of race and its impact on politics and really just on life in general in the United States today.

Jeff Cobb (23:13):

Glaude takes his book's title from Baldwin's last novel, and here's the specific passage. "Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost; it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again." Glaude focuses on Baldwin's need to renew his fight for racial justice throughout his career, how disappointments and setbacks, from the murders of Medgar Evers, Malcolm X, and Martin Luther King Jr., all the way to Reaganomics, how he had to really begin again from those, and Baldwin doesn't let himself off his own hook. He feels the responsibility. He doesn't abdicate. He begins again over and over.

Jeff Cobb (24:01):

And I think that Glaude's book is arguably the story of James Baldwin as a magnificent lifelong learner. Learning, after all, is about changing, and change, at least meaningful change, is often hard to accomplish. We've talked about learning being hard, learning taking effort. And so in *Begin Again*, I see a powerful example of the need for learners to begin again, and to adopt that beginner's mind that you brought up earlier, Celisa, and I do think that beginner's mind is a powerful learning stance.

Celisa Steele (24:39):

I read *Begin Again* too at your recommendation, Jeff, and it definitely deepened my understanding of these current disruptive times, and Glaude keeps circling back to the notion of beginning again throughout his book. He ends most chapters with some repetition of that notion, and so I really like that you just homed in on that, Jeff.

Celisa Steele (25:00):

The book I'll share is Rebecca Solnit's *Call Them by Their True Names: American Crises (and Essays)*. And in it, she examines a broad assortment of American crises—so think racism, sexism, climate change—and she looks at those crises through the powerful and necessary work of calling injustices by their true names. The book was published in 2018, but it collects essays

mostly published earlier and in other places. I think there's one from 2004, but most of them are dated in the 2015-to-2018 range.

Celisa Steele (25:38):

The essay called "Naïve Cynicism" in particular has been coming back to my mind again and again. And in that, she writes that pundits and non-pundits, quote, "use bad data and worse analysis to pronounce with great certainty on future inevitabilities, present impossibilities, and past failures. The mind-set behind the statements is what I call naïve cynicism. It bleeds the sense of possibility and maybe the sense of responsibility out of people."

Jeff Cobb (26:13):

That's really interesting. She mentions responsibility just as Baldwin did in the passage Glaude's title comes from.

Celisa Steele (26:20):

Yeah, you're right, and what she describes as naïve cynicism—which is kind of this world-weary assumption that things are as they are and it's kind of a fool's errand to try and change them—so she talks about how naïve cynicism also leads to, quote, "the tendency to oversimplify," and then she writes, "If simplification means reducing things to their essentials, oversimplification tosses aside the essential as well. It is a relentless pursuit of certainty and clarity in a world that generally offers neither, a desire to shove nuances and complexities into clear-cut binaries. Naïve cynicism concerns me because it flattens out the past and the future, and because it reduces the motivation to participate in public life, public discourse, and even intelligent conversation that distinguishes shades of gray, ambiguities and ambivalences, uncertainties, unknowns, and opportunities." That's the end of the Solnit passage.

Celisa Steele (27:28):

That kind of disinterest, that lack of motivation to take action, or even to have a meaningful conversation, I think that's just absolutely deadly for learning. Curiosity and questions are at the heart of learning, and the naïve cynics that Solnit describes, they aren't curious, they don't ask questions. And what she offers in that essay is an "alternative to naïve cynicism", and she says that it's, quote, it's "[a]n active response to what arises, a recognition that we often don't know what is going to happen ahead of time, and an acceptance that whatever takes place will usually be a mixture of blessings and curses that will unfold over considerable time."

Celisa Steele (28:12):

And then she wraps up by saying, "Naïve cynicism loves itself more than the world; it defends itself in lieu of defending the world. I'm interested in the people who love the world more, and in what they have to tell us.... Because what we do begins with what we believe we can do. It begins with being open to the possibilities and interested in the complexities." That's the end of that Solnit passage, but I think being open to the possibilities, being interested in the complexities—I mean, that sounds like a good definition of a lifelong learner to me.

Jeff Cobb (28:58):

If you haven't already, we encourage you to reflect on the four questions we used to scaffold this episode. And even if you have, you may want to revisit them as things have changed and time is passing. Some of what you thought of as disruption seven months ago has likely

stopped being a break in pattern or activity; it's now the expected, and it can be valuable to remember and examine those shifts in your thinking.

Jeff Cobb (29:24):

The four questions again are: 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? How can you assess the effectiveness of your response? What else do you need to do to respond?

Celisa Steele (29:48):

We'll also offer two additional questions for your consideration. These are inspired by Baldwin, or Baldwin via Glaude, and by Rebecca Solnit. So, one, where in your learning business do you need to begin again? And then, second, how can you counter naïve cynicism in yourself and your learners—that is, how can you be open to possibilities and interested in complexities?

Jeff Cobb (30:17):

You can find show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode254, along with a transcript and a variety of resources.

Celisa Steele (30:26):

At leadinglearning.com/episode254, 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 (30:42):

We would also be grateful if you'd take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcast. Celisa and I personally appreciate it, and those reviews and ratings help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Just go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review and rating.

Celisa Steele (31:00):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode254, you'll find links to us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (31:11):

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

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]