



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 257

Celisa Steele (00:00):

So things that might have felt unprofessional before now, just feel like how life is, and people in general seem to be more forgiving, more gracious about those minor disruptions because we're dealing with major disruptions—the pandemic, the economy, racism, the elections—then these other disruptions—the child walking in, the dog barking—really do seem minor in comparison. And I think there's an interesting possibility in this grace. It could contribute to an environment where more learning and engagement can happen.

Jeff Cobb (00:40):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:42):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:50):

Welcome to episode 257 of the Leading Learning Podcast. The final installment 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, and Celisa spoke with Shilpa Alimchandani, a diversity, equity, and inclusion strategist for episode 253.

Celisa Steele (01:18):

In episode 254, Jeff and I talked about what we've learned from Seth and Shilpa and checked in on more recent developments in these disruptive times. Jeff spoke with Tracey Steiner, senior vice president for education and training at the National Rural Electric Cooperative Association in episode 255, and I talked with Shawn Boynes, executive director of the American Association for Anatomy in episode 256. In this final episode of the series, we'll reflect on what our conversations with Tracey and Shawn added to our understanding of the learning business in disruptive times. And we'll offer some possibilities for what a learning business serious about surviving and thriving in these disruptive times might do next.

Jeff Cobb (02:06):

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.

Celisa Steele (02:19):

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available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode257.*

And all of our categories came up overtly in your conversation with Tracey, Jeff. In addition, you and she talked about the fact that her industry was already experiencing disruption—disruption that had nothing to do with the four categories that we had in mind.

Jeff Cobb (02:35):

Yeah, these electric co-ops were definitely already experiencing some pretty profound disruption—the proliferation of renewable energy sources like sun and wind, for example. And I think that’s a good reminder that some of these newer or more timely disruptors like the COVID-19 pandemic or political contentiousness of a major election year, those may be layered on top of other disruptors. So be aware of what your market is experiencing already and in addition to the types of disruption we’ve named because the disruptions all interact and commingle and contribute to the complexities of living and working.

Celisa Steele (03:15):

And those are the complexities that learning businesses need to understand so that they can really serve their learners. Like Seth, Tracey raised the issue of climate change as another category of disruption. Again, you and I didn’t explicitly name it, but we definitely see climate change having profound impact on how the world lives and works. And Tracey noted that climate change can be a polarizing topic among those whom NRECA serves.

Jeff Cobb (03:44):

Right. NRECA serves people with a wide variety of views of and opinions on climate change and what needs to be done or not. And climate change is one of those topics that tends to get politicized. And so there are politics mixing in with discussions about climate. Now, in your conversation with Shawn, Celisa, the pandemic, its economic impact, and racism came up overtly, and while politics weren’t an explicit topic, any talk of systemic racism, implies politics, has a political shading as the political infrastructure is one of the big systems involved in establishing and perpetuating racism.

Celisa Steele (04:24):

Absolutely. The political system is a biggie, and Shawn and Tracey also point to learning businesses and other organizations, employers in general, as another big player in systemic racism, and both see the potential for those organizations to support or combat racism.

Jeff Cobb (04:44):

Yeah. Tracey made an interesting point about co-ops having a kind of built-in belief that they exist to serve all, even communities that have historically been underserved. And, in the case of NRECA, for example, for-profit companies didn’t want to electrify rural America because it was simply too expensive. And that’s where the electric co-ops come in and fill the gap because regardless of the profit margin, they’re committed to providing electricity for all. And I think her point, while extra true of cooperatives, is generally true for associations. So many associations have at their core a commitment to serve a particular group—a profession, a trade, an industry—and they’re committed to serving that entire group, not a subset. And so there’s a kind of philosophical approach underpinning most associations that make it a natural fit to support equity and inclusion. And there’s a natural diversity among their stakeholders and those they serve.

Celisa Steele (05:44):

And Shawn sees George Floyd's killing as an inflection point. That is, despite what you were saying about a pursuit of equity being a natural fit for many learning businesses like associations, many still managed to keep the issue of systemic racism at arm's length. If their mission or focus wasn't tightly on equity or racism, they sidestepped; they dodged. But George Floyd converging with the pandemic, that happened at the same time, and so a lot more people had the space and the time to look at racism more closely this year. And there was demand from employees and society in general for organizations to do more than issue statements about DEI, to look at the makeup of their leadership and staff, to make changes, to not stop at fine-sounding words but to also take anti-racist action. Talking the talk is fine and good, but also you need to walk the walk—do the hard but necessary work that makes positive change possible.

Jeff Cobb (07:01):

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?

We revisited those questions in the last Celisa-and-me episode in this series.

Celisa Steele (07:36):

And at the end of that episode, number 254, Jeff and I each shared some of what we're reading, and then we offered two more reflection questions, kind of fresh kindling for the reflection fire. And those questions were based on the reading that we shared. Inspired by Eddie S. Glaude Jr.'s book *Begin Again: James Baldwin's America and Its Urgent Lessons For Our Own*, we asked, "Where in your learning business do you need to begin again?"

Jeff Cobb (08:07):

And, inspired by Rebecca Solnit's essay "Naïve Cynicism," we asked, "How can you counter naïve cynicism in yourself and your learners—that is, how can you be open to possibilities and interested in complexities?" Our hope is that you spent a little time thinking about those questions and how you might at least begin to respond. And perhaps as you listened to what Tracey and Shawn had to say, you heard 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 and the places where you might need to begin again. And we always try to model behavior we want to see, so we want to revisit the questions inspired by Solnit and Baldwin and Glaude, and we'll start with "Where in your learning business do you need to begin again?"

Celisa Steele (09:00):

And, as a reminder, that question comes from a passage in one of Baldwin's novels. And that passage goes like this: "Not everything is lost. Responsibility cannot be lost; it can only be abdicated. If one refuses abdication, one begins again." So, for us, that question gets at the idea that the important work which would include the kind of large-scale change many learning

businesses are after—the big-picture, needle-moving work of improving a trade, profession, or industry and those serving in and served by that trade, profession, or industry—the important work likely won't be easy, but it also shouldn't be abandoned. The responsibility shouldn't be abdicated. Instead, we should begin again, over and over, as many times as necessary, looking at how to do right.

Jeff Cobb (10:01):

From my conversation with Tracey, I heard her talk about the greater emphasis NRECA is putting on online learning as an example of beginning again. And she estimated that online learning was maybe 15 percent of their portfolio of offerings pre-pandemic versus 85 percent in person. So that's been a huge shift for them to ramp up that 15 percent to essentially 100 percent for at least a time. And she doesn't see that snapping back to how it was. The growth of online learning is a beginning again that's likely to stick with NRECA after this pandemic is over. And the larger set of online offerings allows them to serve their very small member companies who can't justify the cost or time of place-based training, but it also allows them to better serve even those who can attend place based options. Because while they may have the budget and staff to allow for that some of the time, sometimes online will simply be more convenient. So Tracey and NRECA seem committed to offering more choice in the future.

Celisa Steele (11:06):

I think that's very interesting because I have a hunch that a lasting impact of the pandemic will be a more judicious choice of the delivery medium. I'd say that there was a heavy emphasis on place-based pre-pandemic. During the pandemic, we're seeing almost exclusively online offerings. And so once we're back to having the option of doing in-person or online, I think—and I hope—that organizations will be thoughtful about which medium fits best with the goals and objectives of a particular offering. And I suspect that we might see more blended learning, at least for longer programs, so that learners do some work online and then meet in person for other components.

Jeff Cobb (11:55):

And what about from your conversation with Shawn? Does something come to mind that speaks to this question of where in your learning business do you need to begin again?

Celisa Steele (12:05):

Yeah. What comes to mind are Shawn's comments about working from home and the lasting impact of that and the potential for WFH to produce benefits, not only for workers who don't have to deal with the stress of long, hairy commutes but also for organizations hiring them. Suddenly the talent pool is much bigger if you don't have to hire in the DC metro area, for example. Shawn mentioned letting go the Big Brother tendency, that need to know exactly where employees are and what they're doing. And I think that's kind of a parallel idea to competency-based education. It's less about how you do the work. It's more about whether you can do the work well.

Jeff Cobb (12:52):

And there's also the potential for those a learning business serves to grow when there's less emphasis on place. Near the end of your conversation with Shawn, he talked about the current moment providing an opportunity for organizations to reposition and to maybe serve a different audience, and I think he's right. Now is a fantastic time to really look at your market,

to get really clear on who you serve, why you serve them and not others, and how you serve them.

Celisa Steele (13:21):

Yeah. Related to that, a begin-again idea that came up in both your conversation with Tracey and mine with Shawn is really look at meetings and conferences, which are often big money-makers and figuring out the revenue model and the sponsor relationships when you're not dealing with the business-as-usual, show-up-in-one-place events.

Jeff Cobb (13:42):

Right. And Tracey mentioned that they're trying to rethink sponsorship in the current environment and that packaging and bundling benefits are part of what they're looking at as they aim for that triple win: good for sponsors, good for members, and good for NRECA. And hopefully it will result in deeper and more strategic partnerships with key sponsors, which would be a win in any environment.

Celisa Steele (14:20):

Let's turn to our second question now: "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 (14:32):

That question was inspired by Rebecca Solnit, who coined the term *naïve cynicism* and sees it as this sort of world-weary assumption that things are as they are and that it's futile to try to change them. And that naïve cynicism leads to a tendency to oversimplify, to push things into cut-and-dry categories, sacrificing nuance and ambivalence for the sake of certainty and clarity, even when certainty and clarity are impossible.

Celisa Steele (15:02):

And, while Solnit wasn't writing about our current disruptive times because her essay was published a few years ago, naïve cynicism seems like a real danger of the present moment. Without the possibility of nuance and ambivalence, a polarized electorate seems almost a given. We have a right and a left in the United States that don't seem to have the ability to hold meaningful conversations and reach compromise.

Jeff Cobb (15:30):

Right, and Tracey mentioned NRECA really trying to create and cultivate an expectation among its audience that the organization is where they can go and agree to disagree and have constructive, productive conversations about tough issues. She sees a lot of value to be unleashed in the organization being that kind of convener. And I think that is a way to counter naïve cynicism. Rather than sweep politics under the rug and try to ignore it, embrace the differences. Be open to the possibilities, and be interested in those complexities.

Celisa Steele (16:04):

I found the discussion you and Tracey had about facilitation really helpful in a practical way. That is, having constructive, productive conversations about tough issues isn't easy, and you usually won't get good results if you leave it to chance. You really need to scaffold the discussions and have facilitators involved who truly know how to not take a position while helping participants state their positions clearly so that others can then, hopefully, respectfully,

question and challenge those positions. So there's an opportunity for learning businesses that want to take on tough issues to invest in the skillset of facilitators and instructors to make sure they're prepared and able to help productive conversation and exchange take place.

Jeff Cobb (16:52):

And difficult but productive conversation, that's really at the heart of Shawn's podcast, right?

Celisa Steele (16:57):

Absolutely. The Texts to Table podcast that he co-hosts is focused on the difficult conversation of race, or I should probably say the difficult conversations, plural, about race because race is such a complex issue with a long history in the United States. And Shawn talked about that podcast being a risk for him. He's a proponent of taking risks, so the podcast is him walking the walk. He said he's tended to compartmentalize personal from professional, but the podcast breaks down those walls. And personal and professional might be some of those cut-and-dry categories that don't really exist anyway. But he was willing to take the risk to embrace the chance to decompartmentalize, to make public some of the conversations he was having already with Black peers, other Black leaders about race issues. And I think there's at least a twofold lesson in that. First, take risks. And second, don't worry about mixing personal and professional when it makes sense to mix them. We have "one wild and precious life" to live, to quote poet Mary Oliver.

Jeff Cobb (18:17):

Since this is the final episode of this series, we'd like to do a kind of round-up of the interviews and offer a highlight or insight from each of the four conversations that were part of this series. And I'll start with Seth since his was the first interview to appear in this series. For me, the 100 CEOs initiative was a standout from that conversation for at least two reasons. First, I think it's an excellent example of how to be proactive, even in a situation where you feel like you have very little control. His business had dropped to zero overnight, and he could have sat it out and waited for business to pick back up. But he decided to use the moment to learn. He decided to have 100 conversations with CEOs to see what they were dealing with in the moment and what they were struggling with, where they were having successes.

Celisa Steele (19:11):

Yeah. And that initiative strikes me as being a concrete way of being open to possibilities and interested in complexities.

Jeff Cobb (19:21):

Yeah. The multiplicity of conversations, the different voices and viewpoints, those certainly must've given Seth some new insight into those possibilities and complexities. And those weren't sales conversations. They were chances for him to learn. So that ties to the other thing that really struck me about the 100 CEOs initiative—it seems like an eminently stealable idea, basically. In fact, Seth got the idea from someone else in a different situation, a different industry, but as you and I talked about in our last episode, Celisa, a learning business could easily set out to have 100 conversations with learners and learn a lot about their audience's needs and wants along the way. So how about you, Celisa? What's an insight or a highlight from your conversation with Shilpa?

Celisa Steele (20:09):

One word from our conversation stands out: *grace*. She was talking about how the pandemic has really forced full recognition of the fact that people are juggling and trying to balance many, many different responsibilities simultaneously. She talked about how she was on a call with a client, the CEO of a company, and her child walked in and interrupted. And it was fine. So things that might have felt unprofessional before now just feel like how life is. And people, in general, seem to be more forgiving, more gracious about minor disruptions. Because we're dealing with major disruptions—the pandemic, the economy, racism, the elections—so the other disruptions—the child walking in, the dog barking—really do seem minor. And I think there's an interesting possibility in this grace. It could contribute to an environment where more learning and engagement can happen. There are three conditions that have to be met if learner engagement is to happen: meaning, availability, and safety. And this grace contributes directly to safety, the sense learners have of being able to participate as their true selves, without fearing damage to their self-image, their status, or career.

Jeff Cobb (21:38):

And we dedicated a past episode to those three conditions of learning engagement, so we'll make sure to link to that episode in the show notes for this episode. Now, from my conversation with Tracey, I'll highlight a question she asked: "What is our next normal that we want to create?" And this is a question that puts us in proactive mode. It encourages us to consciously respond to what's happening and choose how to respond. In disruptive times like these, so much can feel out of our control, but Tracey really emphasized the need to stop focusing on what we've lost or what we can't control and start focusing on the good that's coming out of this. And I don't think that's a glib, Pollyanna view. It's about doing the work to clearly see what's happening and to figure out what's good and working so we can continue that, deepen that even when some of these disruptions die down in the future.

Celisa Steele (22:41):

Right. It's about not only being shaped by what's happening but also shaping what's happening. From my conversation with Shawn, I'll hit on the idea of risk again. We've already touched on Shawn being a proponent of taking risk, but I think he's really onto something when he highlights now as being a really good time to take risk. In times of disruption, there's often a forgiveness, a kind of grace to go back to Shilpa's word. And so it can be, well, less risky to take risk at this moment. And Shawn also talked about leaning in when he was talking about risk. And I think that's an important addition to this idea of taking risk. Leaning in, to me, is about building on momentum, carrying through on a potential that's out there. So it's not about being rigid and insisting on in-person learning during the pandemic. It's more about leaning into the possibilities and complexities of online learning during the pandemic. So you're taking something that the disruptive times suggest, and you're leaning into it and taking some associated risks at a time when you're less likely to encounter pushback.

Jeff Cobb (24:05):

Innovating came up in your conversation with Shawn, Celisa—innovation being the goal of risk very often. That is, hopefully, something good and useful like innovation comes out of risk. And when we put innovation together with disruptive times, I can't help but think of the concept of disruptive innovation, even if that's not what the term really means.

Celisa Steele (24:29):

Well, so let's talk about what *disruptive innovation* does mean. It's a type of disruption distinct from sustaining innovation. So sustaining innovation improves a product or service without significantly affecting existing markets and players in those markets.

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Jeff Cobb (24:47):

And then disruptive innovation, in contrast, creates a new market by providing a different set of values that overtakes an existing market. An example, I'm sure, would help at this point. The first automobiles, for example, weren't a disruptive innovation because they were expensive luxury items, and most people kept using their horse-drawn carriages. The affordable Ford Model T, however, that was a disruptive innovation because it was cheap enough that it overtook the horse-drawn vehicles—the Model T disrupted the existing horse-powered transport market.

Celisa Steele (25:23):

I'm definitely seeing sustaining innovation happening during these current disruptive times. The tweaks folks are making to improving contactless systems across a range of markets, from restaurant takeout and grocery shopping to hotels and other accommodations to...

Jeff Cobb (25:42):

...to pivots to virtual conferences and creative ideas for gathering safely during a pandemic. An electric co-op in Wisconsin, for example, held a drive-in meeting in April so they could stay in conformance with their bylaws that required an annual meeting. But, by keeping everyone in their cars or trucks, they could do it safely. And voting was done by horn honks. There's an innovation for you—short and quick for aye and a long and loud for nay.

Celisa Steele (26:11):

That's great. And so there are all these types of sustaining innovation, the incremental changes or improvements, but the question remains what disruptive innovation will come out of these times? And I don't think we know the answer yet.

Jeff Cobb (26:29):

No, I don't either, but I think it's worth noting that typically disruptive innovations come from outsiders and/or startups rather than existing, especially market-leading, companies or organizations, just because outsiders and startups tend to have less invested in maintaining the status quo and are often nimbler than established players. So, not to sound the alarm, but I think these disruptive times may well lead to some disruptive innovation that could threaten existing learning businesses. Think if you were to build a learning business from the ground up in the midst of a pandemic, you'd probably do it pretty differently than most learning businesses were built back before all of this happened. You might have a much different cost and overhead structure if you were 100-percent digital from the start and be better positioned in your products and services to fit a world where gathering in person is tricky and dangerous.

Celisa Steele (27:29):

These are indeed dangerous and tricky times. As we're recording, we're seeing a new surge in COVID cases. When we recorded the first episode of this series, about six weeks ago, there were more than 35 million confirmed cases of coronavirus worldwide and almost 7.5 million in the U.S. Now there are more than 55 million confirmed cases worldwide and over 11 million cases in the U.S. That's according to the Johns Hopkins Coronavirus Resource Center. So that's really tremendous growth in six weeks.

Jeff Cobb (28:04):

And, of course, the political contentiousness is still brewing. Even as Biden has been declared president-elect and recognized by many countries around the world, Trump, of course, has not conceded at the time we're recording this.

Celisa Steele (28:18):

And the economic situation remains difficult for many. Many businesses, many families are faltering amid new shutdowns and restrictions caused by the coronavirus spike. And as the political contentiousness makes it hard to get financial aid passed through Congress. And racial justice, of course, is still a stark need.

Jeff Cobb (28:42):

So, in short, it seems there's a lot of learning that's simply not happening. We collectively don't seem to be doing a good job of learning from these current disruptive times. I'm seeing a lot of self-justification, people getting entrenched in their stances, digging in their heels, and saying "We've always done it this way" rather than really taking in the data and evidence around them and reevaluating whether the old ways make sense going forward.

Celisa Steele (29:10):

Right. Now seems like a time ripe for sunseting products and services—or at least considering sunseting them. And sunseting came up in a variety of our conversations. It came up with Shawn, I know. Self-justification strikes me as a roadblock to learning. Self-justification is the opposite of reflection and evaluation, and those are things that we know do help with learning.

Jeff Cobb (29:37):

Yeah, I mean, there are so many barriers out there to learning, and we've written and talked about these before. I read a book recently called *Mistakes Were Made (But Not by Me)*, which kind of sums up the whole self-justification perspective. And they, in fact, talk about self-justification a great deal in that book. They're not coming at it specifically, or they don't describe it as from a learning perspective, but that's really what it is. Self-justification interfering with learning. I think self-justification might be the archenemy of learning.

Jeff Cobb (30:21):

Reflection is a great antidote to self-justification, and so we'll offer one final reflection question to complement the six we've already offered in this series.

Celisa Steele (30:31):

We're borrowing this last question from Seth Godin: What would you do even if you knew you would fail?

Jeff Cobb (30:39):

And this question uses a kind of trademark Seth Godin verbal jujitsu. It flips the usual formulation on its head. What would you do if you knew you couldn't fail?

Celisa Steele (30:50):

And by flipping it, the question gets at what's important. It's easy to do things if failure is removed—even unimportant or questionable things are easy to do if you know you won't fail. But there are some things that are worth doing even if you knew you would fail. In a non-

learning example, this might be something like trying to save someone's life. If someone's drowning, even if you ultimately fail, you would still try to save them.

Jeff Cobb (31:19):

And there are likely equivalent scenarios for your learning business. So what would you do even if you knew you would fail? What are the things that are worth doing just to do them, just to try them, even if they fail?

Celisa Steele (31:34):

Think of those things worth doing, even if they fail, and then do some. As Shawn advises, "Take the risk."

Jeff Cobb (31:44):

Now this is the last episode in the seven-part series on the learning business in disruptive times, and we hope you've enjoyed this series. We'd welcome your feedback. Do you like the series approach versus the self-contained single episodes that we've historically done? Do you have a suggestion for a topic for us to focus on in a future series? We really would love to hear from you. You can contact us through the comments form on any of the show notes pages, just put in whatever suggestion you have—or if you got a compliment or criticism, we're open to that as well. Or you can e-mail us at podcast@leadinglearning.com. You can find show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode257, along with a transcript and a variety of resources.

Celisa Steele (32:33):

We'll resume new episodes of the Leading Learning Podcast with a new series starting in January 2021. In the meantime, the archive of past episodes is available on the Leading Learning site, and at leadinglearning.com/episode257 you'll see options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss the new episodes, we encourage you to subscribe. And subscribing also helps us get some data on the impact of the podcast.

Jeff Cobb (33:01):

And we'd be grateful if you 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 (33:18):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode257, you'll find links to us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (33:30):

Thanks again. And until next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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