



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 274

Jeff Cobb (00:00):

The idea of systems and processes is critical because ideally you want to leave as little of this to chance as you can. And that's a key reason we're talking about market and needs assessment as part of a conversation about learning science. There are scientific ways to go about them.

Jeff Cobb (00:21):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:22):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:31):

Welcome to episode 274, the third installment in a seven-part series focused on learning science and the practical implications of the science of learning for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele (00:42):

This episode focuses on market assessment and needs assessment. So let's start with talking about those terms. Market assessments and needs assessments are related but slightly different. A needs assessment is a process for identifying gaps between current conditions and desired outcomes, and then addressing those gaps. In the case of learning businesses, those needs are usually tied to content that individuals need in order to know or do something.

Jeff Cobb (01:11):

And then a market assessment—sometimes called a market analysis—analyzes a learning business's assets and activities to determine strengths and weaknesses and what you should do to best position your brand to take advantage of your market and your audience.

Celisa Steele (01:28):

I think of market assessment as more organizationally focused and needs assessment as more learner-focused or product-focused. So market assessment is about understanding the profession, field, or industry you're learning business serves; knowing the other options learners in that space have; and determining how you can best support excellence in that profession, field, or industry through the products and services that you offer. Needs assessment is about understanding learner needs and learning gaps so you can design and offer specific learning opportunities that will help close those gaps. Needs assessment and market assessment overlap. You need to understand how your learners perceive their needs and therefore how they're going to perceive your products and make sure that you're developing the right products and positioning them in the right way in the market.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode274.*

Jeff Cobb (02:24):

And I think of market assessment as addressing the question of “What will people buy?” and needs assessment as addressing the question “What positive impact will we create for the learner?” And, as you note, Celisa, the two questions are—or at least should be—completely related, but learning businesses will often emphasize one over the other, focusing, for example, on what they think learners need versus what will actually sell, or vice versa

Celisa Steele (02:53):

When you’re focused on what learners need, you’re going to be probing and asking questions about the challenges and opportunities that they—or their employers—are currently facing. You’re going to be working to identify the specific knowledge, skills, attitudes, behaviors needed to address those challenges and opportunities, and then you’re going to be determining the learning experiences that will help produce the needed knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviors. When you’re focused on market assessment, you’re concerned about how large the market is, the other options learners have in the market, what their buying behaviors are, how price-sensitive they are, how aware they are of your offerings.

Jeff Cobb (03:38):

And perception as you mentioned, Celisa, really matters in both cases. You have to understand how members of the audience you aim to reach perceive their context and their specific needs. And you’ll either need to align with those perceptions, or you’re going to have to determine ways that you can influence those perceptions to attract learners to the experiences you offer.

Celisa Steele (04:00):

I want to emphasize what you just said, Jeff, because I think it’s a subtle but very important point. You do the market assessment and the needs assessment to understand the current situation and perception. That doesn’t mean you have to accept that status quo as the right or only way to do things. You can, as you just said, work to influence and change perceptions. That’s arguably a harder tack to take, but it’s also one that can really stand you out from competitors, and it’s a tack that can really allow you to influence and change the field, profession, or industry that you serve for the better.

Jeff Cobb (04:40):

So with those descriptions in mind, let’s turn to the relationship between these kinds of assessments and learning science. Why do we include market and needs assessments in a discussion of learning science?

Celisa Steele (04:54):

To answer that question, I think it could be good to remind ourselves of how we defined learning science. Learning science is an interdisciplinary field, and it’s devoted to better understanding how learning happens and then applying that understanding to creating and improving instructional methods, curricula, learning environments, and more. The curricula and learning environments and materials that get developed involve specific content. In order to be able to apply learning science in context, that is in order to be able to apply learning science to specific content, we have to know what that content is. Market assessment and needs assessment are how we determine what that content is. And just as learning science focuses on getting verifiable evidence of what learning approaches work best, these kinds of assessments allow us to determine the content not by assuming or guessing what’s needed in the market but by following processes and systems that help us ensure the content is what learners need.

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Jeff Cobb (06:03):

The idea of systems and processes is critical because ideally you want to leave as little of this to chance as you can, and that's a key reason we're talking about market and needs assessment as part of a conversation about learning science. There are scientific ways to go about them. That may seem obvious to a certain extent, but we see all the time situations where learning businesses have not been scientific, where they have not really followed systems and processes to assess their market and learner needs. And maybe we've been guilty of this too at times, I have to admit. But the lack of system or process is really at the root of the whole "We built it, and they didn't come" problem that we hear about so often.

Celisa Steele (06:48):

And we keep using the word *process* because assessment really needs to be something that takes place over time. That doesn't mean there's not value in taking snapshots, like you would with a typical needs assessment survey, for example. It just means you shouldn't rely solely on that. You need to have methods in place of observing and engaging with prospective learners over time to get a truer sense of their situation, of their challenges, of their problems and how they behave.

Jeff Cobb (07:17):

And, in addition to treating assessment as a process rather than an event, rather than a snapshot in time, you also need to bring a scientific mindset to it—meaning that you treat your ideas about market and learner needs as theories, and you're always searching for evidence to disprove those theories. That's really the essence of the scientific method. And I'll note that we have a tool we've developed for supporting this approach, and that's the Market Insight Matrix. The matrix lays out market assessment according to three stages—idea generation, idea verification, and idea testing—and three types of activity—tracking, listening, and asking.

Celisa Steele (08:00):

So let's talk a bit about the stages. First is idea generation. The higher the quality of the ideas you can come up with initially, the easier and more effective the subsequent parts of the market assessment will be. So you're going to want diverse input at this stage. You don't want to rely only on the input of your education committee, if you have one, for example. You're going to also want input from staff and volunteers, from important customers and influencers in your market.

Jeff Cobb (08:31):

Right. And then next is idea verification. In our experience, many organizations effectively stop at the idea generation stage. They come up with a few good ideas, prioritize one or two of them, often based on the thinking of a small number of people in the organization, and then begin building a product. A better approach is to take the ideas generated in that stage one and verify them by looking at what Web searches, customers and prospects, discussions in social media, and surveys and polls, among other approaches, can tell you.

Celisa Steele (09:05):

And then the third stage is idea testing. To test the idea, put the concept, or a version of the product—maybe a minimum viable product—you want to put that out in the marketplace and see if you can get people to take action. Will they sign up for future notifications if you set up a landing page? Or can you even pre-sell the product and thereby help ensure that there are going to be some purchases for that offering from the get-go?

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Jeff Cobb (09:33):

And so those stages are one key part of the process that's covered by the matrix. The next part is the types of activities you should engage in across those stages, and these fall into three main categories. Tracking focuses primarily on historical quantitative data. What can you tell based on a variety of tools like Google Analytics, Google Trends, and data from your e-commerce and learning management system? What can you tell about the behavior of your members and customers in the recent past from those? What content has been of interest? Where have they found that content?

Celisa Steele (10:14):

Listening is the second of the three activities. Listening is where you really focus on observing what your customers and learners are saying and doing. What are they saying as they interact with each other? As they interact with your organization? As they interact with your offerings? Even as they interact with the offerings that your competitors have out there? And you can do a lot of this by monitoring social media, you can conduct user testing, or you can mine evaluations—which you're probably asking those questions after folks complete one of your offerings. So all of those are great ways to listen.

Jeff Cobb (10:50):

Definitely. And then asking. Asking involves you engaging directly with stakeholders and requesting their input on specific questions. And this, of course, is the path of traditional tools like surveys and focus groups, but it also includes activities like pre-selling or even crowdfunding the creation of an educational experience.

Celisa Steele (11:13):

So you take those three stages that we just touched on briefly, and those three types of activities, and that's how we get the Market Insight Matrix. And we're going to link to that in the show notes. You can use the matrix for identifying and then implementing specific ways in which you're going to engage in market assessment over time. It's really a pretty simple tool, but it brings a lot more clarity—and it brings more rigor—to the process.

Jeff Cobb (11:41):

And, really, the key to the kind of assessment approach that we're advocating here—and it's equally true of market assessment and of learner needs assessment—is putting yourself in a position to gather, analyze, and then, of course, leverage valuable data about your learners.

Celisa Steele (11:58):

And as we're talking about assessment and thinking about assessment and particularly assessment as this ongoing process versus a one-off event, or even a periodic event, that brings to mind some of what Brenda McLaughlin, the CEO of SelfStudy, said when you spoke with her, Jeff.

Brenda McLaughlin (12:15):

What we're actually doing is that we're blending learning and assessment. Each interaction has both learning and assessment so that we know where you stand, you know where you stand, but the system is taking you on the next right step for you. We are as a platform providing sort of a GPS for learning. So somebody can come into the platform, and they start interacting with content, and we are using AI to evaluate very early—earlier than other systems—and very

accurately what somebody's knowledge is against the standard, and that is an external standard that our clients set. So we're really all about tying out to what someone's trying to accomplish in the real world. Not like "You're great in our program." "Your great in our program" meaning that we're giving you information about some goal you're trying to achieve. And by knowing where somebody stands, very accurately on every interaction, then we can provide the next thing that they should have.

Brenda McLaughlin (13:15):

And we're not a backward looking, "How did you do before?" Our technology is actually based on technology that's used to navigate satellites, right? It's a polling, it's "We think this is what you should know next," and then we're assessing that and then deciding what comes next. And the result is very much like a GPS. We are evaluating where somebody is. We know where they want to go because we know the standard that's trying to be achieved through our clients, and we're evaluating progress, performance, and engagement because you know the best course in the world doesn't work if you lose people. And we have all these measures helping us evaluate what should come next, including evaluating the content based on how that's performing in the community and with that individual to know which type of content and which piece of content for the next person that's going to move them along.

Brenda McLaughlin (14:08):

So between the AI and the natural language processing, we are knowledge mapping and assessing all the time. So, on every interaction, both the user and the mentor knows exactly where somebody is. The system is providing the next lesson or resource or material that we think will progress them, but also they can take that information and go outside the system because they know this is their gap. We're always identifying gaps, weaknesses, and strengths—reinforcing strengths but filling the gaps and weaknesses with the materials available.

Celisa Steele (14:45):

Brenda's talking about a natural next step in assessment, moving from a more general needs assessment, which guides content design and development, and getting to a level of specific-to-the-individual, specific-to-the-content assessments that happen in the moment. And when that happens, assessment really then is a process. It gets baked into the process rather than being something separate and discrete, and it's certainly not a one-off event in that context. And that kind of attention to assessment helps learners fill gaps and reinforce strengths.

Jeff Cobb (15:26):

SelfStudy, our sponsor for this series is harnessing artificial intelligence to help organizations assess and address learner's needs in real time. SelfStudy is a learning optimization technology company. Grounded in effective learning science and fueled by artificial intelligence and natural language processing, the SelfStudy platform delivers personalized content to anyone who needs to learn, either on the go or at their desk. Each user is at the center of their own unique experience, focusing on what they need to learn next. For organizations, SelfStudy is a complete enterprise solution, offering tools to instantly auto-create highly personalized, adaptive learning programs, the ability to fully integrate with your existing LMS or CMS, and the analytics you need to see your members, users, and content in new ways with deeper insights. SelfStudy is your partner for longitudinal assessment, continuing education, professional development, and certification. Learn more and request a demo to see SelfStudy auto-create questions based on your content at selfstudy.com.

Celisa Steele (16:34):

We're grateful to SelfStudy for helping to make this series on learning science possible

Jeff Cobb (16:41):

So learner needs are important, but, in the context of learning businesses, learner wants are just as important. Your learners most likely have other options and choices, so offering what they need along with what they want increases the chances that they'll opt for you out of the sea of choices available to them.

Celisa Steele (17:01):

And I think that jibes with comments Megan Sumeracki made in the last episode when talking about captive audiences (so high school students, for example) versus adults served by learning businesses who usually have choices about what learning to engage in—or what learning to not engage in. She pointed out that enjoyment, which might lead to higher engagement and higher motivation, might be more important in those non-captive situations. And so I interpreted that as meaning learner needs, which would dictate content, can be married with learner wants, so “Are they enjoying the learning?” And, if you can do that, if you can provide that content that they need and also give it to them in an enjoyable way, I mean, that really helps you create an extra potent offering. And so I think ideally learning businesses do give learners both what they need and what they want.

Jeff Cobb (17:57):

And that's definitely what learning businesses should aim for. It can be pretty easy to get overly focused on what we feel learners should be doing or achieving. That's usually what corresponds with what we mean by needs, but it's also really critical to understand what they actually want to be doing when it comes to learning. Now, I do think an important twist on this, though, is that asking learners directly about what they want can often result in misleading or even downright invalid data. Learning businesses tend to be very fond of asking prospective learners about their preferences, but it's really hard to do that in a way that doesn't influence the answer, and, in many cases, learners really don't have enough experience to say—and, even if they do, preferences are, well, they're just generally a poor indicator of behavior.

Jeff Cobb (18:51):

Our view is that you really need to ask about behaviors, not preferences, to try to get at what learners want. So, for example, instead of asking if you would prefer a self-paced online course or an instructor-led Webinar series, ask if they've actually taken a self-paced online course before or participated in an instructor-led Webinars series. That helps you get at behavior rather than just a preference.

Celisa Steele (19:16):

What you just talked about there, Jeff, that's an approach that we have talked about before in more detail in a past episode called “Give the Learners What They Want,” so we'll make sure to link to that episode in the show notes, and we do highly recommend that for listeners of this learning science series, if you haven't already listened to it before. In that episode, we talk about four key areas of gathering and assessing data. Assessing behavior rather than preferences, which we just talked about, is one of them, but we also discuss understanding your demand dynamics. So this is just looking at what your customers have either already been buying or what they've been looking for, and that's going to give you a lot of insight into what might be of interest to them and what they might be likely to purchase and engage with. And you also want

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to, to the extent that you can, try to figure out *why* have they been buying those topics, those courses. Why have they been looking for content in particular areas?

Jeff Cobb (20:17):

And then another area is identifying key value factors. It's really important to know what kinds of factors prospective customers weigh when they're making purchase decisions about educational products and experiences, so you'll want to get a clear read on which variables significantly raise or lower value in the eyes of your learners. And these might be things like a presenter's reputation or the results that past participants have been able to attribute to their participation in a course. We've been asking these kinds of value-factor questions for years in surveys, and it's always very eye-opening to see what seems to be going through a prospective learner's head in the decision-making process. Then, of course, you're going to want to adjust to address that in how you communicate with the learner. So that was the third one: identifying key value factors.

Jeff Cobb (21:11):

And then the fourth one is gauging commitment and conversion, not just interest. You know there are a lot of times when learning businesses will ask prospective customers about whether they're interested in a particular offering. "Are you interested in taking X, Y, or Z course?" And a lot of times what happens is that people say they're interested, but then very few people sign up when the course—or whatever the product is—is actually offered. So we offer some ideas of how to get at commitment and how to convert in that "Give the Learners What They Want" episode that we just referenced. And, again, we'll link to that in the show notes.

Celisa Steele (21:50):

I want to add some perspective from Myra Roldan here. Myra is a seasoned technologist and learning professional, and we're going to hear more from her in another episode later in this series. But what she has to say about the importance of understanding your audience, I think, is very much in keeping with this discussion of combining wants and needs.

Myra Roldan (22:13):

I really recommend don't target the world with your learning, right? That's very easy to do. It's like everyone's going to learn from this, but really understand who your target audience is because that will allow you to understand what modality will work best for them, right? So it's this whole concept of applying design thinking to a product, which is a learning product, right? So I speak a lot about design thinking, and I work with educators also to help them understand what is the best modality. It's not like "It's all e-learning," "It's all in-person or synchronous, async." It could be a combination of all of them, right? I think that we get stuck in "It all has to be e-learning," "It all has to be synchronous or asynchronous." It depends on your audience. It depends on the concept that you're trying to deliver knowledge on, and it also depends on location. Do your learners have access to specific technologies to be able to complete the learning that you're trying to deliver?

Myra Roldan (23:11):

There's a lot of different examples around this. I can give you a great example. I just did a session with Latin America, where we used WhatsApp, and we did a little Zoom, and we did WhatsApp videos, and we had educators engaging in WhatsApp. And the reason that that was selected was because a lot of the people that were attending the session lived in remote

locations where they did not have access to Internet or access to a computer. So you have to take into account your audience.

Celisa Steele (23:43):

Myra's comments provide some concrete examples of how knowing your specific audience can—and should—inform choices about the design and development and delivery of your offerings. And knowing your audience comes from the kinds of intelligence and insight you can get from market assessment and needs assessment.

Jeff Cobb (24:05):

And I like too that her comments get at not just the pure content but also things like the format, the media, and really understanding what's going to be appealing to your learners. I mean, it's of course true that you want to use the right methods to achieve what the learning objectives are, what the learning outcomes are for whatever learning experiencing you're offering, but that can come through a variety of formats. It can come through a variety of media and still be able to use the right methods to achieve the objectives, and I think it's always important to have that in mind and make sure that you're producing the types of offerings, the formats of offerings, including the types of media that are going to be appealing to your learners.

Celisa Steele (24:52):

In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode274, you'll find a link to the Market Insight Matrix, a free resource that may prove helpful if you're looking for a do-it-yourself tool to help you with market assessment.

Jeff Cobb (25:06):

At leadinglearning.com/episode274, 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 podcasts.

Celisa Steele (25:22):

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

Jeff Cobb (25:38):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode274, you'll find links to us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (25:49):

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

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