



Leading Learning Podcast Episode 276

Patti Shank (00:00):

The two biggest ahas here are that we deliver far too little practice for any level of proficiency. In fact, no proficiency. And we generally deliver the wrong types of feedback to help people become more proficient.

Jeff Cobb (00:21):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:23):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:31):

Welcome to episode 276 of the Leading Learning Podcast, the fifth episode in our seven-part series on learning science's role in a learning business. We're focusing this episode on practice and feedback, two distinct but definitely related tools in learning.

Celisa Steele (00:49):

Right. Practice and feedback are related because it's often practice that produces something that an instructor or a technology tool or another learner can respond to with feedback. And practice and feedback are very powerful tools because they tend to move learning experiences away from pure theory and towards application in the real world.

Jeff Cobb (01:12):

But, in our experience, they tend to be underused by learning businesses. I think there is just a cultural bias that expects content with a capital C, an expectation that learning products are primarily content, the stuff of, you know, presentations.

Celisa Steele (01:29):

And so, to help us explore practice and feedback and what learning science knows about their ability to support learning, we went back to the Leading Learning Podcast archives and found some choice sound bites from Cathy Moore, Michael Allen, and Patti Shank. And we also pull in perspectives from Ruth Colvin Clark and Myra Roldan, who were featured in the previous episode in this series, episode 275 on content design.

Jeff Cobb (01:57):

Now, trying to talk about practice and feedback apart from content design is like trying to split hairs or atoms or name your difficult thing to separate. But practice and feedback are, you know, based on the content, and they need to be designed in. But we wanted to devote an

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episode to practice and feedback because they are so essential to effective learning, and, so often, they're given less time and attention than they deserve.

Jeff Cobb (02:30):

Let's start with technologist and learning professional Myra Roldan. What follows is from Celisa's conversation with Myra.

Celisa Steele (02:38):

What one aspect or tenet of effective learning—and I'm thinking in particular of something that's supported by good research and science—what one aspect or tenet do you wish was more broadly understood and supported by those designing and providing learning to adults?

Myra Roldan (02:56):

I do specialize in adult learning, and I also have a background in cognitive behavior.

Celisa Steele (03:00):

Ah.

Myra Roldan (03:00):

And so, there is research—and I'm going to put this in simple terms because I hate using lingo. So this whole concept of learning by doing. So a lot of instruction that you see out there in the world, whether it's in higher education, workforce development programs, even these free e-learning courses or paid courses that you can take, they really focus on theory. So helping you to understand a concept. Where they fall flat is on this whole concept of hands-on. What do you do with that? How do you apply it? What are the scenarios in which you apply that?

Myra Roldan (03:35):

So I have this whole framework that my team uses and that we've developed around this whole concept of application, taking something from theory and being able to apply it in a real-world setting. And that's where a lot of programs fall flat. Every single educational initiative that I've evaluated over the years, they fall flat on this whole concept of, okay, so now you do this, but how do you use it? Right? So the application piece, I think that's really important.

Celisa Steele (04:09):

I love how simple it sounds, but obviously, then, there's a lot, I'm sure, involved in that, making sure that the doing happens so that the learning can then happen.

Myra Roldan (04:19):

Yeah.

Celisa Steele (04:20):

But I love just that laser focus on people have to do things in order to learn. And, of course, there are many models and frameworks and approaches to designing learning. There's ADDIE. There's SAM. There's design thinking. Which of those do you tend to find useful, and which would you recommend to others to help them ensure that they're designing effective learning?

Myra Roldan (04:42):

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When you think about ADDIE and SAM, those are really process-driven guidelines. So you do an analysis, then you design. So it's not really a framework for creating learning itself, but it's more of a process of what's the workflow. I think that design thinking has applications everywhere, but you need to look at whatever solution you're creating as a product, right? And you need to be able to step out of your own comfort zone and work with a group to understand and develop an understanding of who your audience is, what are their obstacles, to find solutions for delivering creative learning, right? So, that's just on the delivery piece.

Myra Roldan (05:23):

So I mentioned that my team and I developed this methodology. It sticks and just because we tend to be a bit facetious, it just works. It's called CRAP. So it's concrete for the C, R is repetition, right? Then, it's abstraction. So meaning you do something concrete, then you kind of repeat a process in a different modality, and then you learn the theory about it, and then you practice, and you go through it again. Focus on developing mastery. So having someone do something first without really knowing what the whole thing is, but at least getting their hands dirty, having them try and fail, right? Or try doing their own way of doing it. And then having them kind of repeat that process and then teaching them, okay, so you did this stuff, right?

Myra Roldan (06:16):

And also the R can also stand for representation, having them draw something out. That's what I mean by repeat. They do it physically, then they do a representation or repetition, which is kind of like drawing it out, kind of like diagramming what they did. And then having them learn the theory behind it because theory doesn't always drive learning, right? But if you have someone do something, and then they read.... Have you ever tried to learn how to do something really simple? I don't know, like change a faucet or something like that? And you watch a YouTube video, right?

Celisa Steele (06:48):

Mm-hmm.

Myra Roldan (06:49):

Then you try it. So think about the trying piece, right? You saw it really quick, but then you try it. You may have to go back, and you may do a mental diagram about it, then you read about it, right? You read. Oh, that's how that works. Right? And then you go back, and you try it again. So it's kind of that concept.

Celisa Steele (07:07):

Mm-hmm.

Celisa Steele (07:08):

Well, it certainly is memorable to call it CRAP. I think I have that nailed going down. And it gets back to what you were talking about in terms of the true importance of learning by doing because you have it right there with the concrete. You're starting with having them try something, and then you have the P too, the practice, so they're coming back to that over and again.

Jeff Cobb (07:29):

Myra introduces what may be the most striking acronym that we've had so far on the show—and we do deal with a lot of acronyms, so kudos to that. But Myra's comments also drive home the importance of designing practice into a course or other learning experience. Practice is one of the four pillars of the methodology that she and her colleagues have developed for designing learning, and it's something that we've certainly talked a lot about over the years. It's not enough simply to tell learners that they need to practice. You have to scaffold the practice, you have to build in the opportunities, and you have to set aside time for them to do it.

Jeff Cobb (08:17):

Ruth Colvin Clark is one of the leading translators of academic research on learning science into practical advice for practitioners. Celisa asked Ruth for her advice on how learning businesses might give practice and feedback a substantial role in their learning offerings.

Celisa Steele (08:33):

We know that practice and feedback are critical to learning and to improving. But I feel like they are also areas that get ignored. Sometimes we leave practice to happen after the course or class is over. Or they're not done very well—feedback might be sort of thin, or it's not specific for a particular user. What suggestions do you have for an organization to more seriously make practice and feedback a part of their learning offerings?

Ruth Colvin Clark (09:06):

I think you're absolutely right that these are two critical areas that are often shortchanged, and the main reason I always saw for this is people are very limited in time. No matter how complex the knowledge and skills, somebody somewhere has said, "Okay, you have to do this in six hours." Or you could have, you know, two days or whatever. So then there's this temptation—let's just cram all this content into this limited timeframe. And practice takes time, and feedback takes time. So, you know, we don't have the time for that. We've got to—the expression I always used to hear, "We have to cover the material." Cover the material. Well, what does that mean? That means sometimes just dumping out a lot of information and not really giving people the opportunity to apply that and to see how that, those knowledge and skills, can actually work in their job tasks.

Ruth Colvin Clark (10:03):

So, I think, you know, my motto would be, "Maybe do less, but do it well." And maybe you're just wasting time to have tons and tons of content. So how do you know? One thing is I always encourage to evaluate outcomes. I think the vast majority of evaluation in most learning settings is just the student rating sheet at the end, and that can be misleading. Often students don't have much of a basis for evaluating, or there's a bias. They just write down, "It was great," a 9 or a 10 or whatever. But if you can actually begin to evaluate the learning that takes place, and if it's not what you'd hoped for, then you can begin to say, "Okay, what kind of engagement did we have? Are people just sitting there awash in content, or are we giving the opportunity to apply that knowledge?"

Ruth Colvin Clark (11:00):

The second thing I would recommend is to set standards. If you're in an organization and you're going to be developing some training, you can set standards regarding engagement. For example, oh, once upon a time, somebody said after every screen you need engagement. Well, that's not really true. But you can begin to think after every new chunk of information, after every new topic, at a minimum, you want to have a certain amount of relevant—and that's the

other thing I'm going to mention. Engagement is not just clicking on a screen to move forward. Engagement is getting learners to actually use that knowledge, use those knowledge and skills in job-relevant ways.

Celisa Steele (11:40):

I like your point that diagnosing the problem—and that, in many cases, the reason there isn't more practice and more feedback built in is because of a time constraint. And so the first step can often be cutting, so that then there is more time for the practice and the feedback. And your focus on outcomes makes a lot of sense because, again, if we're really looking at learning versus satisfaction, we want to be able to see what the learners can actually achieve after an experience.

Celisa Steele (12:12):

And you also got into engagement and this idea of setting standards and maybe having a rule or a goal of having some engagement after each topic that you present to learners. But let's pause there because I'd like to know how do you define learner engagement?

Ruth Colvin Clark (12:33):

That's a really important question because I know a lot of people think of engagement as clicking somewhere on a screen, even if it's just the forward or backward buttons. And I would not define learner engagement in that way. The technical term for this is a "generative learning." So what are some techniques we can do to help the learner actually mentally process the knowledge and skills? And these techniques fall into two major categories. There's overt techniques, which are behavioral, and a behavioral technique involves some overt action of the learner. So the most classical type of thing is some kind of a question that the learner has to answer or respond. Or, for example, a simulation, which is very high-overt engagement.

Ruth Colvin Clark (13:25):

But engagement doesn't always have to be just about active responses from the learner. We have what I call more of a mental form or a covert form of engagement using generative methods. For example, we've seen that when you add a relevant graphic that's relatively simple to your text or to your audio, learning is going to be much better because you get better mental engagement. Even though it doesn't look like the learner's doing anything, they're absorbing that graphic and the words and forming of their own mental model.

Ruth Colvin Clark (14:00):

So I think engagement is just being sensitive to all the different ways that we can get the learners to both actively and behaviorally respond—and also, though, to mentally engage in what's going on.

Celisa Steele (14:16):

You mentioned both overt and covert approaches to engaging learners. Is one more beneficial than the other in terms of helping with learning transfer?

Ruth Colvin Clark (14:29):

We, of course, want both, but the advantage to the behavioral engagement is you have the opportunity for feedback because the learner has actually taken some action, whether that's a role-play in a classroom situation, or it's answering a multiple-choice question, or it's engaging in a simulation. The learner is making an active response, which you—then you can give

feedback to what they have done. Compared to the covert—because it's going on in their heads—it's not as easy, or you don't really know what they've processed.

Ruth Colvin Clark (15:06):

And so I think you want to shoot for plenty of the behavioral types of engagement, but also the covert type of engagement is very important. But I would go in favor of the behavioral engagement because of feedback.

Celisa Steele (15:19):

Do you have suggestions or ideas for how one can design to help cultivate engagement among learners?

Ruth Colvin Clark (15:27):

There is a technique that's well-researched, which is called self-explanation questions. This research was actually originally done in the '80s, and they studied physics students, and the physics students, they were reading a textbook section that maybe had an example with it. And then, they looked at, they had these students talk aloud as they read this bit of the textbook, and then they recorded all of those things that they said, and then they looked at what the students said, which was a reflection of their thoughts, and then compared that to the kind of grades and how successful they were with that particular topic.

Ruth Colvin Clark (16:08):

And what they found is that the more successful learners were self-initiating their own self-explanation questions. So they might look at an example and rather than just reiterate that in their mind, they would actually begin to make inferences and draw principles from that example. So, ideally, that would be a technique to teach people. But, by and large, in adult education, we hope that people maybe have learned some of those techniques in their prior educational experiences. So, what we probably do, best to do, is just to actually insert self-explanation questions.

Ruth Colvin Clark (16:46):

For example, let's say you're showing an example of a role-play or a sales example or something. Then, after people see the example, you can ask a question. It can be a multiple-choice question or an open-ended question that forces the learner to really say, "Oh, I didn't really pay attention to that" and go back, review the example again in order to answer the question effectively.

Jeff Cobb (17:10):

Ruth Colvin Clark's comments just offer so much. A lot jumps out at me. First, I think her assessment that time constraints are a big part of why practice and feedback get short shrift is just spot on. Now, counterintuitively, we have to do less in order to achieve more. We have to present less content if we're going to help learners do more. I also find her advice to favor behavioral engagement over mental engagement because of the opportunities it offers for feedback really insightful and really useful. And the idea of using self-explanation, encouraging learners to explain to themselves, also feels like another very practical piece of advice, and self-explanation can be employed in just about any situation.

Celisa Steele (18:00):

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Celisa Steele (18:54):

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Jeff Cobb (19:09):

Dr. Patti Shank is the author of the three books in the Deeper Learning series: *Write and Organize for Deeper Learning*, *Manage Memory for Deeper Learning*, and *Practice and Feedback for Deeper Learning*. When Celisa spoke with her earlier for the Leading Learning Podcast, she bemoaned the emphasis on content at the expense of practice and feedback.

Patti Shank (19:37):

We spend far too much time on just throwing content at people and actually making it harder for them to learn, making memory just be challenged by what they're trying to learn. And so practice is one of those essential and deep elements that is needed for proficiency. And how many courses have you seen where it's 99 percent content and 5 percent practice—and the practice isn't realistic? We worry about developing content for people. We don't worry as much about developing adequate and accurate practice at the level of proficiency they're at so that we can move them up from non-proficient to partially proficient to adequately proficient.

Patti Shank (20:31):

Here's what I'd say. We are required by our job titles and our mission and what businesses need to actually deliver some level of proficiency, and practice is needed. So the two biggest ahas here are that we deliver far too little practice for any level of proficiency. In fact, no proficiency. And we generally deliver the wrong types of feedback to help people become more proficient. And so we actually create problems for proficiency rather than creating proficiency when we do this wrong.

Patti Shank (21:14):

One of the things people say to me on a regular basis is, "This is all academic stuff. It's not applicable." And that's simply not so. The actual research may be academic, and it may be hard to understand, but that's why I'm doing the things I'm doing because this is how we get people to where they need to go faster and with better results.

Celisa Steele (21:42):

Patti Shank is just a wonderful translator of academic research on learning science into actionable approaches, and I'm so glad that she's doing that work. In what she just said, she highlighted two big overarching issues with most learning experiences. One, they involve too

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little practice. And then, two, they often offer the wrong type of feedback. Now, to help address the too little practice aspect, we've already heard from Ruth that often you have to cut content so that there's more time for practice. To help with the wrong type of feedback issue, I asked Patti to expand on what type of feedback typically gets given versus what type of feedback would be more helpful in terms of helping learners learn.

Patti Shank (22:32):

Feedback is very nuanced. I'm going to talk about people who don't know a whole lot because we tend to give more feedback to people who have less prior knowledge, right? And so here's what some of the research says, and I find this just fascinating. So they talk about three types of feedback, especially with electronic feedback as opposed to one-on-one feedback. So I'm going to limit it to people who know less, less prior knowledge, and giving feedback in electronic format.

Patti Shank (23:11):

And they talk about three types. They talk about KR, KCR, and elaborative. And KR is knowledge of results. And so it just says whether you got the answer right or wrong. So you answer a question, let's say a multiple-choice question. You got it wrong, and it says, "Sorry. You got the question wrong. You got the answer wrong." And then there's KCR, which is knowledge of correct results, which tells not only whether you got it right or wrong but tells you what the correct answer is. And then elaborative feedback, which tells you why. There's a whole host of things that can go into elaborative feedback, like why you got it right, why you got it wrong, where it was in the materials you studied. So if you got it wrong, "You got it wrong. Here's the right answer, and here's where we covered this, and you may want to revisit that."

Patti Shank (24:08):

And here's what the research says. And, again, this is really nuanced, so this doesn't apply to every situation. But the best feedback for most people is knowledge of correct answer. Knowledge of results, where you just know whether you got it right or wrong, is not helpful. So "correct" or "incorrect," which you see all the time, not so helpful. You might put those two together. "Your answer was correct, and here's why." And, for an incorrect answer, it would be, "Your answer was incorrect, here's the correct answer, and here's why the correct answer is correct."

Patti Shank (24:46):

Here's what the research says for people who are brand-new. They can't handle a lot of elaborative feedback. They just can't. It's cognitive load, and, in many cases, the best thing to do is, "Your answer was incorrect. Here's the correct answer." And this is interesting too. Show it in the guise of how it was shown in the question. So, they can look at all three or four responses. "Here's the one that was correct. Here's yours. It was incorrect. Here's the answer that was correct." And so this has a lot of implications for what you're going to choose as a multiple-choice system because you want it to provide your answer—"Here it was incorrect. Here's the correct answer. It was correct. Here's the other answers you didn't choose. They were also incorrect." That's already just a ton of information. You might at that point just put a link that said, "If you'd like to review this, click here to go back to this information."

Patti Shank (25:53):

And the answers are completely different for more advanced learners. They start talking about giving hints, letting people figure it out for themselves, and those sorts of things. But if you do that with people who have less prior knowledge, they are instantaneously placed into an overload situation.

Celisa Steele (26:15):

We've already heard time constraints cited as a big reason why practice and feedback get short shrift. I think another big reason practice and feedback get short shrift is because it can be tricky to do well, and I think Patti Shank's comments show that. They show just how truly nuanced feedback is—or how nuanced it should be. It's very complex. A blanket policy of always including elaborative feedback in an e-learning course might actually be doing learners a disservice if they're new learners. And I think Patti's comments also bring to mind Myra Roldan's emphasis on knowing your audience, knowing your customer. Understanding what they already know is going to be really key to providing appropriate feedback.

Jeff Cobb (27:02):

Yeah. I think the distinction between beginning and more advanced learners is just so important, and it can be hard to navigate, especially if you're trying to create, say, on-demand content to serve a relatively wide audience, and so many learning businesses are doing that. But that may require, for example, thinking about different paths through that content so you're able to provide the right types of feedback. And the mode, of course, is important.

Jeff Cobb (27:29):

Patti focused her comments on asynchronous online learning—so more of that on-demand type approach. Live learning, whether you're talking about online or in a physical space, that's going to be a whole different ball of wax, and you might potentially have more possibility to adjust and respond on the fly, respond to the different levels of learners appropriately, but you have to be aware of that need.

Jeff Cobb (28:02):

In what we heard from her on feedback, Patti Shank spoke indirectly about multiple-choice questions. Patti's a fan of well-written multiple-choice questions. She believes multiple-choice questions can be done well, and she's dedicated time and energy to outlining the best ways to use multiple-choice questions effectively for learning. There are, though, many not well-written multiple-choice questions, and that was something Michael Allen brought up when I spoke with him.

Jeff Cobb (28:31):

We talked about the CCAF design model that he developed. Context: a meaningful situation. Challenge: a stimulus or urgency to act. Activity: consequences of user actions and guidance as needed. And then feedback: a physical gesture in response to the challenge. Now, right there in the model, you hear the emphasis on feedback. F for feedback is one of the four pillars, and activity is another of the four pillars. We might call activity practice, and, in the clip we're about to play, he's saying that multiple-choice questions are often poorly executed activities, poorly executed types of practice. Here's Michael Allen talking about activity and feedback as part of his CCAF design model.

Michael Allen (29:22):

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A is activity. Now I need to do something, and a multiple-choice question is not what most of us do in real life during the day, right? So those are not really good learning structures. So what we need to do is, as openly as possible, give people actions or gestures they can use to tell us what they would do in the face of this challenge, and, if they can't do it, then they should ask. If they don't know they can't do it and try and fail, then we know what instruction we need to give them because we've seen how they fail. So the activity is really critical, and just asking somebody to recognize a correct answer is generally a very, very poor way of going about it.

Michael Allen (30:13):

In fact, there's been so many courses that I've been asked to look at where I know nothing about the content, but I can meet the challenges because they're presented to me as multiple-choice questions. And you can do well enough on many multiple-choice questions to get enough correct answers to make it look like you really know what you're doing, when in fact, at the end of this, I think, "Wow. I got a certificate or a congratulations, and I know I don't know really anything about this." And so it's the activity and then finally the feedback.

Michael Allen (30:47):

To me, the feedback that makes the most difference is not somebody telling me, "Michael, that was good, and you're right." Or "Michael, my goodness, wrong." It's the feedback that shows me the consequences of what I did. So, if I did things well, I want to see the happy outcomes. If I didn't do things well, I want to see the consequences of not doing things well because it's going to help motivate me to learn what I need to and avoid those consequences.

Celisa Steele (31:18):

I really appreciate Michael's emphasis on making things as natural and authentic as possible. Let the feedback you provide in a learning experience be as close to the kind of feedback learners would get in the real world as possible so that they understand the positive impact of doing something right or doing something well and they can see the negative impact of doing something wrong or doing it not so well. If you think of parenting, this gets called "natural consequences." You just want to let people see how their actions play out in the real world.

Celisa Steele (31:52):

And, of course, the same goes for practice or activity, to use Michael's nomenclature. The more clearly the practice mirrors learners' actual situations, the much better for learning.

Jeff Cobb (32:04):

Yeah, and I mean, in a little bit of a tangent to the current conversation, but Michael's whole approach to developing e-learning is very iterative and relies very much on feedback, and feedback loops throughout that process. So, as the learning business developing content, you ought to be looking for and using feedback.

Jeff Cobb (32:20):

Cathy Moore is another voice that we pulled from the archives because her Action Mapping model is very much in keeping with cutting content in favor of increased practice. Here's how she described Action Mapping when Celisa spoke with her.

Cathy Moore (32:38):

Very briefly, it is a model that helps us avoid doing information dumps and create more activity-centered training. It starts with the question, “What measurable improvement do we want to see in the organization as a result of this training?” In the case of an association, for example, it would be, “What measurable improvement do our learners want to see in the performance of their organization or in their personal lives, whatever we’re addressing?” And, when we start with that, we then list what it is that people need to actually do on the job to achieve this change. So we’re avoiding jumping immediately to what they need to know, and instead we’re listing what do they need to do and asking what makes it hard to do.

Cathy Moore (33:26):

Maybe they just need some additional resources. Maybe they just need a handy reference. Maybe they don’t need training. But for some other things, if they do need training, such as practicing doing the thing in a safe place, then we design practice activities. Not information presentations, but practice activities. And, in those activities, we link or provide optionally the information that they might need. And then the result is a very activity-focused experience, and the learners have the freedom to pull as much information as they need rather than everybody having to sit through the same information presentation.

Celisa Steele (34:02):

The emphasis on practice activities makes complete sense when I hear Cathy explain the value of those activities. But given how much sense it makes, I wanted to ask Cathy why we don’t see more practice, why we don’t see more practice activities in learning products. Here’s what she had to say.

Cathy Moore (34:24):

I think we have sort of a cultural issue—and I rant about it for an entire chapter of my book—and that is that education, as most of us experience it, is delivery of information and then testing to see if that information has survived in the memory. And so a lot of people think that training is teaching, and therefore training should be delivery of information followed by a knowledge check. And I think also, in the world of professional continuing education, that’s really entrenched because we are focusing on certificates or hours that people spend in class rather than what can they do. So it’s a mindset shift—and it’s a scary mindset shift because we’re so familiar with the information-delivery-and-testing model.

Jeff Cobb (35:07):

That key word that Cathy uses just really jumps out at me: mindset. It’s amazing how many things come back to a need to shift mindset.

Celisa Steele (35:24):

In this episode, we heard from Myra Roldan, Ruth Colvin Clark, Patti Shank, Michael Allen, and Cathy Moore. All of them are learning designers whose work is well grounded in learning science, and all of them believe practice and feedback to be critical aspects of effective learning.

Jeff Cobb (35:41):

For this episode, we want to offer not a resource but an assignment. A resource is more content. An assignment is a practice opportunity. Choose one or more of your learning offerings to audit. Try to find a product that’s representative in some way, maybe not of all that you offer but of a particular product line or a format type.

Celisa Steele (36:06):

In the offering or line of offerings that you choose, what feedback and practice opportunities do you offer your learners? Did you devote the same time and energy to those practice and feedback opportunities as you devoted to content development? Did you use evidence-based approaches to building in practice and providing feedback?

Jeff Cobb (36:26):

And then, finally, based on your informal audit, what changes would you make to how you design and develop offerings in the future? You'll find these four questions at leadinglearning.com/episode276, along with a transcript of this episode and more.

Celisa Steele (36:44):

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Jeff Cobb (37:00):

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Celisa Steele (37:16):

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Jeff Cobb (37:27):

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

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