



Studying Innovation with Mary Byers

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 281

Mary Byers (00:00):

We hear a lot about going back to “normal,” going back and just doing things the way that we used to. Going back to comfort is essentially what we’re asking. But I’m encouraging anytime you hear the words “go back” out of your mouth to gently switch that and change it to “go forward” because I think “go forward” is positive and optimistic and forward-looking and forward-thinking. And I think those words “go forward” just have power and momentum and energy in them.

Jeff Cobb (00:31):

I’m Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:35):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:43):

Welcome to episode 281 of the Leading Learning Podcast. This third episode in our seven-part series on the learning business MBA features a conversation with Mary Byers, and it addresses innovation, continuous evolution, small pilots, and go-forward strategy. Think of this episode as a guest lecture. In business school, you’ll have invited guest lecturers who come in and talk to the class to provide added insight into particular areas and share their experience. We’re thinking of Mary that way. She’s a guest lecturer we invited to speak with us for our learning business MBA. Mary Byers wrote *Race for Relevance: Five Radical Changes for Associations*. The book was originally published in 2011, but a new version, expanded for the post-pandemic world, came out this year. Mary’s main area of interest and focus is innovation and evolution in all things, organizationally, educationally, and otherwise. Mary’s work centers on helping organizations remain relevant in a rapidly changing environment. Celisa spoke with Mary in September 2021.

Celisa Steele (02:04):

You and I are talking as part of a podcast series that we’re doing here, focusing on what we’re calling “the learning business MBA.” For folks going into business in general, there’s the concept of an MBA, where you get all the fundamental knowledge you would need to run a business. We’re interested in what it would take for a learning business to be successful and to succeed. And so, when you think about what it takes for a learning business to succeed, what kinds of skills and knowledge and behaviors come to mind for you?

Mary Byers (02:38):

There’s three things. First is the need to be committed to continuous evolution. Complacency leads to irrelevance, and, when we rest on our laurels, when we get comfortable, those are also

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode281.*

signs that we might be on the way to an irrelevant future. The second thing I would say is we need to be comfortable launching small pilots and recalibrating if necessary. Rarely do we get things 100-percent right out of the gate. So flexible organizations are successful organizations. And then, finally, we need to be comfortable dancing with uncertainty. Those three words, “dancing with uncertainty,” popped into my mind way back in December of 2016, and, though they seemed really important at the time, I realized too that we’re all dancing with uncertainty all the time anyway. And I think the more we lean into that and the more we acknowledge it, frankly, the more realistic we’re going to be as we approach our work.

Celisa Steele (03:47):

I think that’s very interesting. And, of course, that dancing with uncertainty makes me wonder, “Who’s leading?” That’s interesting.

Mary Byers (03:54):

I think in most dances and the traditional dances, we have one leader and one follower, but I’m not sure today that that’s always true nor always good. I think we need to take turns leading and following.

Celisa Steele (04:11):

And so out of those three things that you just mentioned—that commitment to evolution, being willing to launch small pilots and the then revisit and revise as needed, and that dancing with uncertainty—are there ones where you see learning businesses struggle more, organizations struggle more, and then ones where they maybe are more open to embracing that attitude or that mindset?

Mary Byers (04:38):

Where we struggle, honestly, is the keeping the pedal to the metal on continuous evolution and, frankly, being comfortable with small pilots and recalibrating when necessary. Where we excel—and these aren’t things that actually help us—we excel often in protecting the status quo, in meeting deadlines, and doing the comfortable things. And so we need to get comfortable with discomfort, especially going forward in the educational arena.

Celisa Steele (05:11):

So, in that sense, it sounds like those three things that you enumerate—that commitment to the evolution, the launching the small pilots, that dancing with uncertainty—those are the areas where you tend to see organizations struggle, and it’s more that defending of the status quo that’s more comfortable that they tend to gravitate towards more naturally if I’m hearing you correct.

Mary Byers (05:28):

Yeah, absolutely. And another area we struggle in is in the area of risk tolerance. We can’t move our educational efforts forward if we do the same things in the same way. So much has changed. Whether you’re talking about in-person learning, online learning, or a combination of the two, we just have to be more aggressive overall, period.

Celisa Steele (05:53):

When you think about the skills and behaviors that it takes for organizations to succeed, is there a hierarchy in your mind? Are there some skills or knowledge sets that are just more important than others? And if so, which ones are the most important?

Mary Byers (06:11):

I think the willingness to experiment is one of the most important in my book, but that comes along with risk and no guarantees. And, because we're not comfortable with uncertainty, there's tension between those two things. I think many cultures don't support this aspect of innovation and reward consistent performance instead. And so I think there is tension there as well.

Celisa Steele (06:38):

I'm curious, if we're thinking about these things that organizations need to be able to do, learn how to do in order to succeed, how do you see organizations helping their internal team get those needed skills, knowledge, behaviors, mindset?

Mary Byers (06:55):

The ones that are doing it well are being very intentional and deliberate about having conversations about needed skillsets. I can't speak as much to how every organization is doing it because they're all different, but I suggest that each team member have a personal learning roadmap, and I'll provide a copy of that for you for the show notes. Re-skilling is something I've seen an increasing need for over the past five years, but we're not very good at being deliberate or intentional around this. So the personal learning roadmap actually asks an individual to sit down and identify, "Where are the areas that I need to learn and get better at in order to continue to be on the cutting edge of my job and to be able to contribute to the work that we are doing?" And then the roadmap asks each employee to identify where they can learn these needed skills.

Mary Byers (07:56):

Is it an online program? Is that by reading a book? Is it an in-person program? Is it on-the-job training somewhere? Is it shadowing somebody? And then, after that, we talk about strategy on the roadmap. Where can I get the resources for this, whether it's time away to learn, whether it is help with registration, either financially, whatever the requirement is? And I believe that every employee needs to have a personal learning roadmap for two reasons. One, if you're an educational organization and you believe in continuing education, then you really should walk the talk and make sure that your employees are engaged in continuous education. But also it's a way to be intentional and deliberate and have a plan each year for what we need to learn how to do and where we can get the resources to learn how to do it because, as I said earlier, complacency leads to irrelevance. And that's true not only for organizations, but also for individuals.

Celisa Steele (09:04):

I especially appreciate your point about walking the talk because I do feel like, unfortunately, for a lot of learning businesses, they're so focused on serving their learners and their audience, but they don't necessarily think about their own internal needs. So I think the idea of that personal learning roadmap, getting very clear with some specific goals, revisiting that periodically and making sure that those goals are still accurate or updating them as needed, that all makes a lot of sense to me.

Mary Byers (09:36):

You know, internally, employees aren't just employees. They should also be learners as well too. So you're right, and a lot of times we think of employees as serving our learners externally, but we also need to think about employees as learners internally as well.

Jeff Cobb (10:02):

If you're looking for a partner to help you make continuous learning a reality, check out our sponsor for this series.

Tyler Volentine (10:10):

The COVID-19 pandemic catalyzed the merging of events in education for organizations across the globe. Organizations have realized that synergizing their education and event strategies produces immeasurable benefits, but they need a technology solution that facilitates that merge. Cadmium is focused on providing a full suite of technology solutions, enabling organizations to meet the changing environment head on. From a host of event technologies to integrated learning management and content creation tools, Cadmium offers everything an organization needs to generate revenue and drive engagement. Learn more, and request a demo to see how Cadmium can help your learning business at gocadmium.com.

Jeff Cobb (10:53):

We're grateful to Cadmium for sponsoring this series, and we encourage you to visit gocadmium.com to learn more.

Celisa Steele (11:02):

I know from having read *Race for Relevance* that I feel like you put a lot of emphasis on data and the role that it can play in decision making within organizations. I'm hoping you could just talk a little bit about that role that you do see data playing to help organizations make decisions.

Mary Byers (11:22):

I think it is critical, and that keeps us from guessing. And, as we're talking about experimenting and innovation, what we're taking, if we're using data, we are taking less risk actually because we're not just guessing. We're using what we know to be true. And I'll give you just a couple of examples. Heat maps of attendees and where they are domestically or internationally can show where we should be hosting in-person meetings, if in fact in-person is part of your strategy. Saving the chat from virtual meetings can help identify potential new topics and where people are interested in moving next with their own learning. Registration data can tell us what topics are more popular now. Artificial intelligence or capturing artificial intelligence and creating word clouds of online conversations can actually help us figure out, again, what topics individuals might be interested in.

Mary Byers (12:28):

Even the suggestion of other topics—I just recently registered for an online learning program myself, and what I loved is the organization said, "When you pay for this, we're also going to recommend a couple of other related classes that you might be interested in, and, if you sign up for three or more, you'll get a discount." So they actually were packaging their material together in a way that was meeting my needs very, very specifically. And if I wanted to do a deep dive, they were making it so easy for me to be able to do that.

Mary Byers (13:07):

That's why I think data is so important because it can help you meet learner needs more efficiently. It can create efficiencies internally as well. The thing about it is that data isn't always sexy, however, and I think that's one of the reasons that it's underutilized. That's one of the reasons, and then the second reason, frankly, is we just aren't set up to capture data, and, if we have the data, we don't always use it in a way that makes it easy to understand. And sometimes, frankly, we have data that we don't even know we have.

Celisa Steele (13:42):

I was thinking as well that there may be a potential barrier around the internal skill sets. And we were just talking about that, the skills that the internal team needs. You also have to have the data, you have to know you have the data, and you have to have some people who are skilled enough to be able to interpret it and come to some of these logical conclusions about what that data might be suggesting in terms of actions to take.

Mary Byers (14:05):

That is absolutely right, and there are different skill sets needed. If you're a curriculum developer and you got into the learning business because you're focused on the education part of it, this data part of it might not be nearly as interesting to you. But, if you have somebody internally that loves numbers, loves analytics, even if you have a data scientist that you can work with externally, and there are those individuals who will help you with this, they can help you make sense of the data, the trends that the data is showing you, and help you make some decisions, again, based on what you know to be true rather than what you think or hope to be true.

Celisa Steele (14:49):

In thinking about data, I'm thinking about numbers and quantitative data, and so that makes me think of costs. And I know that one of the things that you write about and think about is this idea of organizations and the true cost of programs. So would you talk a little bit about how organizations should go about really understanding the cost of the programs that it's offering?

Mary Byers (15:13):

It is not enough to look at the direct cost. We have to consider overhead and staff time as well. But many organizations are not set up to track this way, so it isn't easy. And if we are under pressure, under deadline, sometimes we don't give ourselves the freedom and flexibility to step back and assess staff time, either to track it or to determine, even at a very simple level, what the average staff hour is, so that, when we look at how many hours staff contributes to building a new course or spends on an in-person meeting, we don't apply what the personnel costs are to that. And so therefore, for many organizations, they think they're making money on it, but, if you add in your overhead and staff time, they'll find that things they think are profitable really aren't. So I think we have to be much more, again, deliberate and intentional about how we're tracking our costs so that we get a true picture of whether we're making money, breaking even, or actually losing money on some of our offerings.

Celisa Steele (16:28):

I think tied up in this understanding perhaps of the true cost of programs, I think, is an argument that you make around volume not equaling value. And so would you talk a bit about the arguments that you see for an organization having a narrower product and service line?

Mary Byers (16:47):

The Pareto Principle, which is also known as the 80/20 rule, tells us that 80 percent of value comes from 20 percent of programs. And that's pretty powerful if you think about it. It really means that you could lean into 20 percent of your programs and probably be more profitable right off the bat. For a learning organization, this means that a few of its programs are going to be the most popular and likely provide the most revenue. What I see, however, is that we're very slow to retire programs, and that leads to educational clutter. So if I am coming to your organization for some sort of education, if I am just seeing a lot of offerings, too many decisions, I'm likely to look elsewhere for my training. So we need to think about regularly, purposely abandoning less popular or dated courses. And I'll give you a really powerful example of this.

Mary Byers (17:53):

Steve Jobs got rid of 70 percent of the Apple product line after he came back. He was gone for 12 years. They were in the red. They brought him back, and, by getting rid of 70 percent of the Apple product line, he turned a \$1 billion loss in 1997 to a \$309 million profit a year later. I can't think of a more powerful example. And it's an example of using a "shrink to grow" strategy, which is counterintuitive. So think having that, understanding the 80/20 rule is important, but I also think it's important that we have a really strong search function, so that, if I am coming to you and looking at your events, I can find what I'm looking for quickly and easy without having to hunt through layers and layers and years and years of programming. And the other thing I would encourage leaders to be thinking about is creating packaging so that, if I am buying one thing, I can get other related material for one fee.

Mary Byers (19:03):

That's also a possible way to increase revenue and, frankly, increase impact with your learners. Then we also want to be thinking about learning pathways or learning journeys so that, if I've started with an area of interest, what would you recommend next? Maybe it's a series of three or four or six programs that I can take, and then I will have done a deep dive, and I will have had a good understanding. So I think the bottom line is also don't make your learners work to learn from you or with you—help them access your programs, your services, your curriculum.

Celisa Steele (19:44):

I think you're so right to point out that we can be slow to sunset products. I think that's very true. And then you point out that when we fail to do that, we do create clutter, and that can then be a barrier to our learners. Even if we have great content, if they can't find it, if they can't discover it, then we may as well not have it. And I appreciate the comments too around how can we package and bundle offerings so that it's very clear that if you're interested in topic X, then here are other offerings that we have in that realm, which can also then be part of that journey, right? So if you're interested in X, you learn a little bit, you can go deeper with Y, and and learn more there.

Celisa Steele (20:28):

All of that makes so much sense to me. And then the shrink-to-grow thing, I just wanted to touch on that because I feel like too that, when we're talking about the true cost of programs, I feel like one of the things I remember from *Race for Relevance* was talking about the opportunity cost. When you are maybe pursuing more than you should, then that means you don't have bandwidth or resources to pursue something else.

Mary Byers (20:51):

This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode281.

That is so true because, if you're busy doing one thing, you can't be doing another. And if the another actually would hold more value for your audience, that is a sad way to be using time. We really want to be using time at the highest and best use, not only of the curriculum developers, but also so that you're meeting the highest and best use of your learners, and you want to make sure that there's a good marriage between what you're offering and what they're desiring.

Mary Byers (21:18):

You mentioned something that I think is worth reiterating there, and that is the sunk cost. A lot of the times we won't abandon a program or we won't sunset or retire a program because we have a high level of sunk cost in them at the outside. And so we want to keep going until we turn a profit, but I think that's why experimenting is so important. If you put a small piece of learning out there and nobody's interested, you don't have to build it out. You can go on to find the next piece of learning that somebody would be interested in, and then therefore your sunk costs will be very low, and it'll be easier to retire or sunset a program eventually.

Celisa Steele (22:08):

I know that you're a fan of a digital-first approach, a digital-first mindset. And I think we hear about digital first a lot these days, which, I think, it can be one of those phrases where sometimes we think we know what it means, but maybe we actually have a slightly different idea in mind than what the person's saying it intends. And so I'm just wondering how you would describe a digital-first mindset, and what that might look like in the context of a learning business?

Mary Byers (22:35):

Most simply, I define it as embracing technology in order to deliver what learners want, when they want it, and how they want it. And I don't necessarily mean only in a virtual environment. I'm talking about embracing technology so that when you are in person, you are delivering what learners want, when they want it and how they want it. Knowing this, however, requires a really close relationship with your audience, constantly asking them, listening to them, and inviting input.

Mary Byers (23:09):

Many organizations I know are behind in building a robust technology framework, and part of that might be they lack the dollars to make the investment. They might lack the expertise to make the investment. And, frankly, it could be as simple as they're intimidated. They don't really understand what the potential impact is, and, because they don't have a depth of experience in that arena, it's just easier to put it off until you have time. And the reality is that none of us have time to embrace a digital mindset or create a digital mindset while we're doing the work of today's business. So we have to have two-horizons thinking, and that is what kind of deadlines do we have coming up immediately? And, then a longer-term deadline, what kind of infrastructure do we need to be building from a technology standpoint so that we can support our mission and support our learners?

Celisa Steele (24:08):

I like that you emphasize the fact that it's use of technology, which could impact even the in-person delivery. And I do think that fits so well with the world as it has evolved because technology does feel just so enmeshed. Even when we're going to in-person events or meeting face to face, we often set that up digitally first, or we have digital resources that go along with

that. So I really appreciate that reminder that it doesn't mean that everything happens online or digital-only. It's more about technology facilitating all that we do.

Mary Byers (24:41):

One of the things that I love about your work, Celisa, is you have said repeatedly that the needs of in-person and virtual aren't always one and the same. And we have to be, when we're doing hybrid events, we need to be considering the needs of the two audiences. There are certainly places where they intersect, but we have to be cognizant of what our goal is and then work backwards in figuring out how to best meet that. And, as you said and just reiterated, sometimes technology, even in the in-person experience, can help accelerate learning, can help make learning interactive, can make it fun, can make it memorable. So, absolutely, we need to be thinking not just about the online experience but how technology can support the in-person experience as well.

Celisa Steele (25:34):

So you've already been offering advice, but I want to just ask more broadly, more generally: What advice do you have for a learning business that's really looking to grow and to move up to the next level?

Mary Byers (25:49):

There are three things I would encourage them to be thinking about. The first is don't wait to determine and articulate your strategy. Put it in writing, get it down on paper, share it with your team, and make that the focus of your longer-horizon thinking because the decisions that you make and the actions that you take today will determine where you're going to be in three, five, and ten years. The second thing that I would suggest is be prepared to invest and invest regularly. And I'm not just talking about money, but I'm talking about time, and I'm talking about expertise. Time, money, and expertise are the three most critical resources, but a lot of efforts are under-resourced or inadequately resourced, and that's why they fail. And then, the third, I would encourage learning companies, learning organizations, to consider finding collaborative partners. In many cases, the expertise we really need if we're going to grow exponentially isn't necessarily on staff, but a collaborative partner, whether it is a vendor or another organization, can help us go further faster.

Mary Byers (27:09):

And I have a really candid case study about this. In July of 2020, I was on a call with a client who had been approached by a vendor whom many on the call knew and thought very highly of, and he was making a presentation about what his company could do. And this is what he said, in a soundbite. He said, "We aspire to be the Netflix of education." And he was committed to coming alongside teachers to help them make their education more interesting using video, whether it was small video vignettes throughout in person, whether it was a flipped classroom, so that you would actually view a video before you got to the classroom to talk about what you had learned and make sense of it. And the organization that he approached, he was really asking for a very small financial commitment, and, more, he was looking for them to be guinea pigs to help walk through this launch with him.

Mary Byers (28:22):

They had very little to lose, but there was a lot of hesitation about it because it had never been done before. They weren't sure about it. And it was everything I could do to keep from screaming, "Say yes! Use this as a small experiment, as a small pilot, set it up, just do one course

with them, and see what it looks like, see how students respond, see how teachers respond to it.” It was the perfect opportunity to innovate without having to spend a lot of time or money because they had a collaborative partner with them. And I think collaboration is the new currency. They did end up saying yes to this, and I was grateful for that because I thought that was actually going to help them start their relaunch, their innovation journey, and make it part and parcel of who they were culturally.

Celisa Steele (29:18):

I love that example because, like you said, it made it easy for them to say yes, to try it out, to have that pilot, and then see where things go. Because they’re going to get some data from that pilot and then be able to understand what that data’s telling them about whether to go deeper or perhaps to pull back. But it sounds like a perfect first step to make.

Mary Byers (29:40):

The only thing that I would say is that sometimes the data that we get back from an early experiment isn’t mature enough to be helpful. If you try one semester or one course of this learning, and the data just isn’t there to support it, I tell people not to pull the plug too soon, especially if you’re launching something new that’s never been tried before. If it’s an educational meeting, it may need two or three years to get legs under it. If it is a course, it may need multiple semesters to get legs under it, partly because it doesn’t have any word of mouth going into the initial attempt.

Mary Byers (30:22):

But the more you do it, the more you can get testimonials, the more you can get social proof, the more you can get social media working on behalf, the more you can be promoting, and then the momentum may take off. So, yes, there is a time to retire and sunset and purposely abandon, but it’s not always right after your first attempt in trying something new.

Celisa Steele (30:45):

That was a very useful addition there to point out that depending on where you are in an initiative, the data may need more time to become more reliable and to really give you a stronger sense of where to go. But you should be collecting it all along, and then you’ll have to draw on when you do get to that point of decision making.

Mary Byers (31:05):

Absolutely. I agree.

Celisa Steele (31:07):

I want to ask at this point—you obviously have such a wealth of experience and background in innovation, and helping organizations. You’ve shared a lot with us already. Is there anything else that comes to mind that you want to make sure have a chance to say to listeners?

Mary Byers (31:24):

I would really encourage people to be thinking about developing a go-forward strategy. We hear a lot about going back to “normal,” going back and just doing things the way that we used to. Going back to comfort is essentially what we’re asking. But I’m encouraging anytime you hear the words “go back” out of your mouth to gently switch that and change it to “go forward” because I think “go forward” is positive and optimistic and forward-looking and forward-

thinking. And I think those words “go forward” just have power and momentum and energy in them. And I think that’s what all the learning organizations need to have. They need to be looking further down the horizon than anybody else is.

Jeff Cobb (32:15):

Mary Byers is an author, speaker, facilitator, consultant, CEO coach, mastermind facilitator, and more. You can find her online at marybyers.com. That’s M-A-R-Y-B-Y-E-R-S dot com. She freely and generously shares her ideas and insights in her blog and in her podcast.

Celisa Steele (32:37):

Since Mary mentioned a go-forward strategy in our conversation and since strategic thinking is a key skill needed by those working in and leading learning businesses, we’ll particularly recommend Mary’s blog post on “Your ‘Go Forward’ Strategy.” At leadinglearning.com/episode281, you’ll find a link to that blog post, as well as to the personal learning roadmap Mary referenced when we spoke.

Jeff Cobb (33:02):

At leadinglearning.com/episode281, you’ll also find show notes and see options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don’t miss future episodes, we encourage you to subscribe, and subscribing also helps us get some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele (33:18):

We’d be grateful if you take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts. Jeff and I personally appreciate it, and reviews and ratings help us 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 (33:35):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. At leadinglearning.com/episode281, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele (33:44):

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

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