



## Tool Talk: MIDDLE ME

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 320

**Celisa Steele:** [00:00:00] To succeed as a learning business, what you deliver does have to be effective. It has to get the learners where they need to go, and using MIDDLE ME can help make that happen for your learning business. I'm Celisa Steele.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:00:18] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast. Welcome to episode 320 of the Leading Learning Podcast, the fourth in our informal series on tools for learning businesses. In episode 312, we talked about the Market Insight Matrix, in episode 315 we talked about the Value Ramp, and in episode 318 we covered the Product Value Profile.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:00:48] In this episode, we'll focus on the MIDDLE ME learning product lifecycle. MIDDLE ME is an acronym that stands for four things: market interface (MI), design and development (DD), learning experience (LE), and measurement and evaluation (ME). Put those abbreviations together, and you get MIDDLE ME.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:01:11] And we'll come back to what those four things are, those four phases in the lifecycle of any learning product, but we want to use the same why-what-how framework we've used with the other tools in this series. So, before talking more about what, let's talk about why. Why use MIDDLE ME?

**Celisa Steele:** [00:01:30] MIDDLE ME is a framework for thinking about the full lifecycle of any learning product. Too often we think too much about the end product, the online course, the Webinar, the conference, the seminar, and we fail to consider all the phases in the lifecycle, and that means we don't make use of all the phases to then produce the best product possible.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:01:55] Right. And that end product is really just one part of the lifecycle. MIDDLE ME expands our thinking about learning products, making it clear things start with understanding market needs and things continue through looking at the results you get from a product once it's being used by learners in the market.

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**Celisa Steele:** [00:02:14] And if we don't take the big-picture lifecycle view, then we risk building it, and they don't come, or enough don't come, and we risk not understanding why a product is failing if we aren't baking in measurement and evaluation.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:02:31] So, on the one hand, MIDDLE ME expands our thinking beyond the end product itself. But it can also focus our attention by giving us four buckets to focus on, those four phases of the lifecycle.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:02:44] And those four phases are again how we get the MIDDLE ME acronym. Market interface (MI), this is where you seek to understand what your learners need and want and where you communicate with them about the value you have to offer. Design and development (DD), this is where you actually create what your learners need and want.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:03:06] The learning experience (LE), this is where learners interact with what you've created. And then measurement and evaluation (ME), this is where you look at the impact of what you've produced, the impact of your learners interacting with what you've created.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:03:22] So having those four areas defined helps you pay attention to the entire lifecycle and gives you some guidance for doing that by breaking that lifecycle down.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:03:37] At Tagoras, we're experts in the global business of lifelong learning, and we use our expertise to help clients better understand their markets, connect with new customers, make the right investment decisions, and grow their learning businesses. We achieve these goals through expert market assessment, strategy formulation, and platform selection services. If you're looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at [tagoras.com/services](http://tagoras.com/services).

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:04:12] Now that we've talked about why, let's turn to what. What is MIDDLE ME? Well, basically, it's a process visual that depicts the four phases of the learning product lifecycle. And in the show notes for this episode at [leadinglearning.com/episode320](http://leadinglearning.com/episode320), you can find the MIDDLE ME visual, but really it's easy enough to just picture it right now in your own mind.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:04:37] Picture a circle divided into four segments with arrows from each segment pointing to the next. Starting at the top and moving clockwise, the four phases are

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market interface, then design and development, then learning experience, and then measurement and evaluation.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:04:55] And the arrows you mentioned, Celisa, are an important aspect of this. This isn't a linear process. Really, it's a circular one where what you learn in each phase ideally informs and shapes what you do in the next phase. So let's take that first phase, market interface (MI).

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:05:12] What you learn there about what the market needs and wants and already has should feed into the next phase, design and development. You want to design and develop products that address a market need or want.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:05:25] And then how you design and develop a product is very directly going to influence the learning experience that learners participate in. In design and development, you'll decide a ton of things about format. Will this be online or off? How much peer interaction will there be? Will it be self-paced? Will some or all of it happen at set times, whether that means meeting in person or online? How long will the product be, a half day offering, a ten-minute microlearning burst, a series of lessons to be completed over weeks?

**Celisa Steele:** [00:06:01] All these decisions and more determine a lot about the learning experience that individual learners have. Delivery and facilitation are also factors in this learning experience phase. How do you contextualize what you've designed and present it to learners? How do you develop to maximize engagement and relevancy?

**Celisa Steele:** [00:06:23] Now, technology comes into play throughout MIDDLE ME, but it often plays a very front-and-center role in the learning experience phase. Your learning platform and related tools are going to make participation in online learning experiences possible and, hopefully, also effective.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:06:41] In measurement and evaluation then, look at the impact of learners interacting with what we've designed and developed, with the impact of that learning experience. And often what's measured and evaluated are things that happen during the learning experience phase, activities like assessments and course evaluations.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:07:01] Ideally your ME efforts are also going to look longer term to how your product or service has changed performance and possibilities for the learner and, where it's relevant, her organization, her employer. It should also consider the impact on your

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organization as a learning business. Measure and evaluate how the product or service has impacted your position in the market, for example, how you're perceived, demand for your offerings.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:07:30] And then the measurement and evaluation feed back into market interface ideally, continuing the circle. As we mentioned already, many learning businesses focus too exclusively on the end product, but, even when they broaden the focus to include the other phases of the lifecycle, there can be the tendency to treat this as a linear process rather than a circular one.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:07:54] So don't forget to use what you learn in each phase to improve your understanding of the market and what you should offer. Your measurement and evaluation findings can give you added information to use during that return, that completing the circle, moving back through market interface.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:08:13] If a product didn't get the traction you expected or hoped for, why not? Maybe a product is doing better than you expected in terms of ratings or in terms of uptake. The data that you get from that measurement and evaluation can become part of how you better understand your market and what learners need and want.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:08:33] And now we also want to point out that MIDDLE ME works well with a science-based approach to learning. You can leverage learning science in each phase.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:08:43] Yes, and learning science is about being evidence-based and data-driven. And MIDDLE ME helps ensure that you have a diversity of data and evidence to draw on at each phase of the learning product lifecycle. Market interface is all about knowing and connecting with your audience, your learners and customers, your potential learners and customers.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:09:06] To help make sure you really know what the market needs and wants—and that you don't just think you know—you're going to want to use science-backed approaches. You can use learner needs assessments and market assessments to provide evidence and data of what the market needs and wants. And then, of course, once you have that evidence and that data, you need to be sure to share that with your designers and developers.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:09:31] And that's because the next phase, design and development, that's where those designers and developers are going to plan and create the products that your learners

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need and want. So they, those developers, they need to know what you found out in the market interface phase.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:09:47] That's so they can choose appropriate learning science-backed approaches that match market need. Cutting and chunking to help with limitations of working memory will always be important. But other aspects can be guided by market wants—for example, whether to include practice and, if yes, how much.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:10:07] The main players involved in this design and development phase are, of course, the people doing the design and development of your learning products and services. If you're lucky enough to have instructional designers on staff, then they'll usually know evidence-based, science-backed approaches to use and to draw on.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:10:26] If, however, you rely heavily on volunteers or subject matter experts as your front-line designers and developers, then your work may be a little bit harder. You may have to spend some time figuring out how do you get those people up to speed on some of the key aspects of learning science and what makes for an effective adult learning experience because many of them will have subject matter expertise, but they may not have that grounding in learning science and adult learning.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:10:55] And that's one of the reasons that we created, that is the reason really that we created "Presenting for Impact," which is our free training for experts who are charged with presenting at conferences and continuing education Webinars and those sorts of educational experiences.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:11:14] "Presenting for Impact" helps those people put learning science to practical use as they are both developing and then delivering learning experiences. And you can find that easily in the main navigation on the Leading Learning Web site, but we'll also include a link to it in the show notes for this episode.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:11:34] Which you can find at [leadinglearning.com/episode320](http://leadinglearning.com/episode320). And, to expand a little bit on what you were saying there, Jeff, in our experience, subject matter experts often are very well attuned to the market, so they're tuned in to that market interface phase.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:11:51] They've got a good sense of what's going on out there, and that's because they're usually part of the market themselves, but then they often need help in the

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design and development phase and using learning science effectively. Now, on the flip side, professional instructional designers often know the learning science.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:12:09] And they get that design and development phase because that's the lion's share of what they do, day in and day out. But often, learning businesses need to do more to make sure that the instructional designers are really tuned in to the market interface phase and then translating that into effective design and development.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:12:31] And then that next phase, learning experience, or LE, that, of course, is where the rubber really meets the road, so to speak. It's where learners interact with what you've designed and developed based on your market interface. And, at this point, you mostly have to make sure that the good design and development, that good DD, doesn't get thwarted.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:12:52] And this is also where feedback and practice happen, and getting those aspects right, well, that can be tricky. So you need to ensure that your presenters, facilitators, and instructors understand the importance of feedback and know how and when to give appropriate feedback. Again, that's something that we do cover in "Presenting for Impact."

**Celisa Steele:** [00:13:14] And then the fourth of the four phases is measurement and evaluation, which we call ME. And this is where we look at the impact of learners interacting with what we've designed and developed. This is where we measure and evaluate the products and services, and we always want to do that with an eye to what insights can we glean that we can apply to our learning business.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:13:36] You're going to want to look at quantitative data and qualitative data—so, of course, ratings, completion rates, success cases you might find using Brinkerhoff's Success Case Method, open-ended feedback on end-of-class surveys, all of those sorts of things. Then you leverage that information and that insight.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:13:57] The data and evidence you collect can help you to refine and improve what you offer, find new things to offer, and identify products you need to sunset, frankly, because they aren't as effective as you'd expected.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:14:11] To succeed as a learning business, what you deliver does have to be effective. It has to get the learners where they need to go, and using MIDDLE ME can help make that happen for your learning business.

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**Jeff Cobb:** [00:14:29] We've talked about why and what, so now let's turn to how to use MIDDLE ME.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:14:35] As with many of the tools we use and that we've already discussed in this informal series of tool talks, simply putting up the visual in a team meeting and discussing the lifecycle can prompt some really meaningful conversation about which phases you're strong in, which phases you're weaker in, what you're doing in each phase, what else you might do in each phase.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:14:59] Yeah, this kind of visual, we refer to these as process visuals. They're very simple, but they're just powerful conversation starters because they give everybody common language, a common point of reference. Same thing is true of the Value Ramp. Same thing is true of the Learning Business Maturity Model.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:15:16] MIDDLE ME really is a great discussion starter. And you can also use MIDDLE ME to assess your capacity as a learning business. Now, capacity for us means the people, processes, and technology you have in place. And capacity is one of the five domains we focus on in the Learning Business Maturity Model. If you'd like to learn more about the maturity model, check the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode320](http://leadinglearning.com/episode320) where we'll link to a number of resources.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:15:47] And just thinking of the phases of the learning product lifecycle will invite you to think about what capacity you have in each phase. What technology and processes do you have in place for each of the phases? What human resources and what budget do you have allocated for each of those four phases? Where do you need to invest more? And that investment could be in hard dollars, or it could mean additional staff time or maybe staff training.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:16:17] So to unpack that a little more, you might use tools like the Market Insight Matrix and survey technology—say, SurveyMonkey or Qualtrics—in that market insight, or MI, phase. Maybe you have a data analyst you can access to help with interpreting that survey data. Maybe you have a market research firm you contract with to annually assess your audiences.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:16:40] Making sure everyone on the team is aware of what you have in terms of that capacity can (a) make sure that you make good use of what you have in place and (b) help you see areas where you may need additional help, whether in the form of people, processes, or technology.

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**Celisa Steele:** [00:16:59] So in each of the four phases, you can inventory what you have in place in general. That's an approach to using MIDDLE ME at the enterprise or learning-business level. But a learning business can also use MIDDLE ME to evaluate individual products or product lines. It can serve as kind of a high-level checklist to make sure you're thinking about all four phases when creating and maintaining your products.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:17:26] Right. So it's a reminder that you should have people, processes, and technology in place in each phase, and you should be using those people, processes, and technology. You likely have a learning management system, an LMS, in place to help you with delivering learning experiences, that learning experience, or LE, phase. But then also think about the data you get from that LMS and how that can help you in the ME, measurement and evaluation, phase.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:17:55] And it's worth noting that capacity—people, processes, and technology—often do get used in multiple phases. You just mentioned learning management systems. And arguably an LMS can influence all four phases, and the same is true for people and processes.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:18:13] They usually won't reside wholly, neatly in a single phase. They'll tend to work in one or more phase, sometimes all four. An instructional designer, for example, will probably focus the majority of their time in DD, design and development, but, by virtue of their role in designing assessments, they touch on measurement and evaluation too.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:18:38] So it's worth thinking about the four phases when you think about your capacity. You may already have technology or people in place, and you just need to expand how and when you make use of them.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:18:55] So that's our look at the MIDDLE ME learning product lifecycle. To get a copy of the MIDDLE ME visual, please go to [leadinglearning.com/episode320](http://leadinglearning.com/episode320).

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:19:06] At [leadinglearning.com/episode320](http://leadinglearning.com/episode320), you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we hope you will subscribe if you haven't. We like subscription numbers because they help us with measurement and evaluation.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:19:20] We'd also be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Jeff and I personally

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appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

**Jeff Cobb:** [00:19:36] Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode320](http://leadinglearning.com/episode320), you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

**Celisa Steele:** [00:19:48] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](http://www.danosongs.com)]*

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