



A Learner's Journey with Connie Malamed

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 324

Connie Malamed: [00:00:00] It's been proven for decades—I mean, decades—that the mind is not a recorder. And so we have to continually interact with people and take them on a learning journey that revisits what they've learned.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:21] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:23] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:31] Welcome to episode 324, which features a conversation with Connie Malamed, a return guest. Connie helps people learn, build, and grow instructional design skills. She leads a membership community at MasteringID.com, she offers live and self-paced courses, and she writes and podcasts as the eLearning Coach. Jeff and Connie get into hybrid and blended learning, including the ambiguity of those terms; the pandemic's impact on learning designers; forgetting; visual design; using community to support learning; personal networks as knowledge; and the importance of the learner's journey. Jeff spoke with Connie in September 2022.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:24] And I don't think I'd even been fully aware of what you're doing with courses and that community that you've put together there. I'd be interested to hear how challenging was that to get off the ground and to get people in there and to make that an ongoing part of your work?

Connie Malamed: [00:01:41] It was pretty challenging to get it going. It took a few years working on the side while doing client work and the eLearning Coach full time. But, once I started it, a lot of people came. It's always challenging to be a leader, to lead people, and I learn as much from them as they learn from me. But I keep telling them, but I don't think they believe me. And, yes, I've learned a lot about how to run a community, and I have a lot more to learn. So it's exciting.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:02:11] Are there any key tips that you can share from what you've learned so far? If somebody is thinking, "Boy, I'd like to be able to put together that type of community for our learners," what do they need to know to not just stumble right out of the gate?

Connie Malamed: [00:02:26] Sure. I would say one thing is to have lots of conversations with your potential members or your current members and find out where they're at, what they're interested in. For example, I thought that I was going to attract newbies, and it turns out that I have people in the full range of instructional design, including PhDs, one with a PhD in cognitive psychology. And, when I talk to them about what they're doing, you know, everyone has gaps, of course, just like I do. And they're just nerdy. They just want to hang out with a group of people, like-minded people. So it turns out that the people who are new at it love having these more experienced people on the calls because, when we all get together, because they can learn so much from diverse perspectives. So it's worked out great. I mean, basically, I think my biggest tip is to be loose and flexible, and you have no idea what's coming.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:29] Hmm. What do you think motivates people to participate? Do they just have those knowledge gaps, or are they looking for the peer connection? There probably isn't any secret sauce, but I guess that's what I'm searching for. Because people will sign up for this kind of thing. I know I've signed up for this kind of thing before, and then I'm a little excited at first, participate, and then it tapers off over time. What keeps people motivated and keeps them engaged?

Connie Malamed: [00:03:55] Well, certainly people come and go, and it's a real open-door policy. Of course, you can cancel. And then people some people come back. I think one thing that keeps people motivated, a big chunk of the people, is that they want to enter the field, just really interested in the courses. Other people, I'll send out surveys. They're really interested, let's say, in one topic like design thinking, and then we'll do a course in that. So I have to keep some things that are advanced and then some things that are very, very basic. I think people like, as everyone says, because we are so technology-oriented and because of the pandemic somewhat isolated, at least for several years, we had been, that people like being in contact with others, and they like the live courses when you give a live course. And the difference between that, even though I am the eLearning Coach, and a self-paced course, so you can ask questions on the spot when you don't understand something, and you can hear a few different explanations. One great example was I was teaching a pretty good-sized group of teachers, mostly teachers, and there was something I was explaining, I can't remember what, that they weren't quite getting. And another teacher popped in and said, "Oh, that's like an individual

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education plan, an IEP.” And I went, “Yeah, that’s it.” So you get help when peers speak up, you know? So I think they like that interaction and that human touch.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:25] That’s great. Well, it sounds like you’ve got the chemistry going there and have something you can build upon. Now, as we’ve been talking, I think already the pandemic has come up once or twice, maybe three times. And I think it’s going to be looming in the background for quite a while now, even as we seem to be emerging from it, more or less. Because you are so deep in the world of e-learning and because e-learning became such a big thing during the pandemic, bigger than ever before, I’d really love to get your perspective on the overall impact of the pandemic on e-learning. So much had to move online. So much moved online that maybe shouldn’t have—or more rapidly than it should have. What do you see as some of the positives and negatives of this big shift that happened?

Connie Malamed: [00:06:14] Well, certainly lots of e-learning and online learning, virtual training, virtual education got a giant boost. I think a lot of people began to figure out that there’s a career called instructional design, and these are people or trainers, whatever you call learning designers, people who can help with this. And I know a lot of professors and training groups suddenly turned to their instructional designers and said, “You know, this isn’t working. What should I do?” And I saw right after the pandemic started, maybe two months later in a Facebook group, I saw someone say, “Finally, after all these years, someone understands what I do!” So I think there was a big boost for the career, and that’s a positive. As a negative—and I don’t want to...I’m happy that many, many teachers have found an alternative to the career that they were unhappy with because the hybrid model, which we’re going to talk about in a bit, was just so difficult. There were sometimes teachers who had to speak to the computer while kids in the class were looking at the teacher on the computer. It was just absurd and difficult for everyone. So a lot of teachers—that was the final straw—left the field. And I don’t want to make anyone feel guilty, but, on the other side of that is, who’s going to teach our kids? Several hundred thousand people in the U.S., I read—so I can’t quote where that number came from—teachers are leaving the field. So that’s big. Now, I do think that should be a wake-up call to administrators. What are you doing wrong? Why don’t teachers have more respect? So that’s one whole side of it. In terms of business, I just think that people realize that a certain amount of things can go online, and then there’s always that human touch that’s needed. So I think that leads us into the whole blended learning conversation, where people see technology alone is not the answer. And I 100-percent believe in that. Just because I’m the eLearning Coach doesn’t mean I think that’s the only way.

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Celisa Steele: [00:08:35] 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 are looking for a partner to help your learning business achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact, learn more at tagoras.com/services.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:09] And we certainly are hearing a lot about blended learning now in our world, the Leading Learning world—continuing education, professional development. Education had to go online. Meetings had to go online. Annual conferences had to go online. So there was this big shift. And, now, as we're shifting back, we're hearing blended. We're hearing about hybrid. So I'd like to—as you said, this is something we should discuss—I'd like to ask you about it. I'm wondering, in the first instance, though, do you do you make a distinction there between hybrid learning versus blended learning? Because I feel like they're being used interchangeably at this point, and I'm not sure that's really correct.

Connie Malamed: [00:09:48] I don't feel like I'm the authority to say what's correct and what's not because in our field—and I'm guessing in most other fields—the terminology is just a mess. Everybody's interchanging words for other words. And I don't get too hung up on it. And I may have blended those terms myself at one point, but, since the pandemic, I've become more strict in using hybrid to be what they're doing in education, where it's e-learning or live learning and then in-person learning, the two blended together.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:21] So you've got people who are in the classroom and people who are online simultaneously, is what you're talking about.

Connie Malamed: [00:10:27] It could be a mix, as in maybe in continuing education, where part of a curriculum involves virtual training, virtual education—so they're all together synchronously—but then there may be some other self-paced aspects of it. But, in blended learning, it used to be something like that. But, now, because we must have...one time I made a list of all the things that you can do besides a course, and I'm sure there were at least 25 or 30 things. I'm talking about you can make a wiki. You can make an information graphic, an explanatory video. With technology, it's almost infinite now. And so I think of blended learning—and this may be my interpretation—as pulling together many different approaches, the best approach for each performance objective, and pulling them together into a blended learning package or curriculum. That's what I think of blended learning.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:11:29] And so, in your mind then, if I'm understanding right, blended doesn't necessarily have to be online and offline. You can blend things online; you can blend things offline. And, as you said, it's more about taking advantage of the different type of media and methods to pull it all together and to provide that dynamic learning experience by doing that.

Connie Malamed: [00:11:48] That's how I think of it. I'm not sure how the rest of the world is thinking of it. I certainly know some people are thinking of it that way. But then there's the downside. And I interviewed on my podcast someone who was an expert on blended learning, and she said the biggest downfall is the mishmash that it can create and the confusion. Because, just like in online and e-learning, we don't want people to get confused about a user interface. We want the user interface to be transparent to the learner. In that same way, if you're using 15 different types of learning, every time someone has to try a new approach, it uses up some cognitive resources. So we have to really stop and think about how can we pull together a holistic plan that isn't using every great type of learning, that fits the performance-based objective and yet is easy for people to slip into going from one to the other. So maybe you would...here's an example. Let's say someone is teaching how to interact with the members of an association. Maybe there are some problems, and there's some customer support, and there's some training for that. Well, it's possible that watching some videos would be great because we're modeling how to act, how to behave, how to conduct ourselves. But then maybe we'd add on something else. A discussion would be great. "Have you tried this? What worked? What didn't?" That kind of thing. So a few modes can work okay, but you don't want to expand it to too much, where people are feeling like "I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do next."

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:34] And so, at least in terms of kind of mixing, blending modes, you can use the modes that are best for that particular outcome you're looking for. So, if you need to convey that information, if you need to do that modeling, video's great. If you need people to then try to reflect and think and express how they would use that in their particular situation, then discussion added into that makes sense. But I think what you're saying too is just because you can do it doesn't mean you should do it. So don't take advantage of—as you referenced earlier, there are thousands of different ways to do things now, so you don't want to overwhelm people. I'd be interested in, when it comes to face-to-face versus online—or face-to-face blended with online is what I should really be saying—because I feel we get a lot of attention on that now, and, in the past, when people were talking about, say, something like a hybrid meeting, they usually were talking about people sitting in the room, and there are also people online simultaneously participating in the same thing. But I get the sense now that, while that's still happening, definitely, I think there's more of a sense now that, as a group, let's have the group do some things online and some things face to face. So it might be a flipped classroom sort of

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thing or just using both online and offline modes. From the standpoint of somebody who designs learning experiences, what do you see as the potential advantages and disadvantages of that?

Connie Malamed: [00:15:03] I think it's great if it works for the audience and for the content, for the situation. Adult learners, a lot of them like, rather than sitting through 30 minutes of e-learning, they can skim a PDF file quickly and get through it. Because everyone's busy. Then I think it's great. I can't tell you how many people come to me, clients, potential clients, and say, "I need you to put this course online," and it's just a PDF. It could be done as a document. There's no interaction. There's no engagement or feedback. But I also want to say that we need to take the audience—of course, it's kind of obvious—but we should always think about the audience. Maybe some of these people are subject matter experts, and they don't have one extra second. So we have to keep that in mind. Or maybe we've got a group that doesn't know technology very well. Well, we have to keep that in mind too. We're not going to hand them out a virtual reality headset and say, "Go for it." So we do need to keep that in mind all the time too.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:16] What else are you paying attention to now as we're, again, maybe the pandemic's a backdrop, maybe it's not, maybe we're just evolving with what we can do with learning and technology. What are some of the trends and new developments that you're really paying attention to right now and maybe you're excited about?

Connie Malamed: [00:16:32] Well, I'm always looking at the research for what is the best way to help people learn. That's just an ongoing, bottom-line interest or requirement for what I do. And it changes some too. But some of the other things are I think that microlearning is great because everyone is busy. People can quickly get in and get out. So I think microlearning—which microlearning is not defined by a time limit as much as it's defined by meeting one small outcome. That's the best way to think of it. I think other things are the approach towards blended learning. I think the awareness that, since we were isolated for so long, I think people became more aware of how much we need human contact. So that's another great thing that I'm paying attention to and learning more about.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:27] I know I've seen you write about—and I think you've even gone back and revisited this some—about forgetting, how do we retain what we learn. Because I think that's just such a big issue. And I'm sure I feel it most acutely in my world because this is the world I'm in, but people attend conferences, seminars. They go to Webinars. They get whatever is delivered during those sessions. And it's gone days, weeks, certainly months later. How do you

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these days think about promoting retention, stemming forgetting so that people do actually retain what they've learned and are able to put it to use and actually change their lives positively as a result of it?

Connie Malamed: [00:18:10] I'm really glad you brought that up. As that's actually something else I'm paying attention to, which is grabbing the best from user experience, design, marketing, all these different fields that somewhat overlap with ours. And one of the big ones is taking that customer journey and bringing it into the learner's journey. And that's how we get people to retain, is we take them on a learning journey. It's been proven for decades—I mean, decades—that the mind is not a recorder. And so we have to continually interact with people and take them on a learning journey that revisits what they've learned. So if there's been a Webinar, I think you have to do follow-up if you want people to remember it—and then not just follow-up, some form of reflection. And I'm finding that discussion is probably one of the best ways to reflect because you hear people verbalize things that you may have been slightly thinking, but you didn't put it into words. And then you hear other people's responses, and everyone has good ideas. So there is a kind of crowdsourcing effect, where you get a lot of input from others. So I think, after these Webinars and conferences, we have to get together again, and special interest groups or some way—little communities of people who went to the conference—some way to help us retain and use. And it's been proven that one learning intervention cannot work. So I try, whenever someone asks me to teach a course, to try to break it up into two days rather than one eight-hour day, which I see people—it could be the most fascinating thing that they really are interested in—by 3:00 or 4:00, their brains are exhausted.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:04] Yeah, I know. That's definitely true of me. I always get this when I'm going to, say, visit a museum, for example, and I'll walk around, and by the time I'm on the third or fourth room, I'm just like, "There's nothing else can fit in my brain at this point," you know? There's just no way that I can spend hours in here. Maybe I'll get some enjoyment just from the pretty colors or whatever. But, in terms of really absorbing it, I've reached my limits.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:27] Now, you said something there, since you are now really involved in community, leading community, facilitating community, it seems like community in general can play a very helpful role with respect to retention and application. Do you consciously try to facilitate and use community in a way to support retention, to stop forgetting among the audience that you're serving?

Connie Malamed: [00:20:52] I do. Once a year I teach a very big instructional design class, and, in that class, it's live, so we can talk. They all have exercises to do. There's a forum where they

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can ask questions, which people don't use as much as just coming to the class and talking. So I do try to do it. And one thing I'm finding is that, if somebody really wants to learn, and they're really dedicated and motivated, they take advantage of everything. And for those who are just trying to slip by for one reason or another—they could have an elderly parent who's sick with COVID, I'm not judging, I don't know what's going on in their world—they don't get as much out of it. And then it all comes down to you can't force people to learn and retain. Kind of sad. I try, but you can't.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:44] No, it's such an important point because I think a lot of times we may convince ourselves that, if we just design it right, people are going to learn. And, of course, we have a responsibility to design it right, but people are only going to learn if they want to learn, if they're going to engage with it. And it can be easy to forget that or not give that enough emphasis sometimes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:04] I know you've done a lot of work with visual design, and that's what we talked to you about the last time you were on the podcast. So I did want to check in on that and see if there are any ways your thinking around visual design has evolved, as you're looking at things like community, as you're looking at things like blended learning and just other developments over the past few years. Anything new in your thinking there?

Connie Malamed: [00:22:28] It's two-sided. On the one hand, I think it's more important than ever. People are using infographics to teach, as one of the teaching mediums. Just, "Hey, here's this infographic. Learn from it." That has to be very well designed. On the other hand, I think there are other things that are more important than visual design, which is kind of blasphemous for me to say, which is really understanding our cognitive architecture. People can only process three to four things at one time. So I feel like, of course, they need to be integrated, but the very first thing you have to do is understand how people learn. And visual design, the visual aspect of our materials, is part of that, and aesthetics is part of that. But there's a bigger whole there. And I also think that, as a field, that people are improving, becoming more aware of it. Aesthetics is unbelievably important in the sense that it makes your work more professional and believable, and that's a whole aspect of it that perhaps people don't even think about if you're trying to get the colors right. But there's just a real high level where, if people respect the materials they're working with, they'll be more motivated to learn. So it is highly important, but it's not the key thing. The key thing is how do people learn and apply and transfer what we're trying to get across?

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Jeff Cobb: [00:23:59] Yeah, definitely. I do think, as far as visual design goes, one of the things that I've personally found extremely helpful over the last several years is it's gotten a lot easier to put high-quality visual elements into whatever you're doing because, whether it's stock photography that actually is halfway decent or tools like Canva or whatever, you can put together visuals. I'm not a designer. I'm not an artist. But I can use those tools to do some interesting things at this point, which, I think, is by and large a good thing.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:33] I'd love to hear about your own approach to lifelong learning at this point. You've evolved some in your career and how you're approaching your work that you've talked about. I'm wondering has the pandemic or any of this evolution that you've gone through or new things that you're learning, anything prompted you to change how you're approaching lifelong learning? Any new habits or practices that that you're engaged in?

Connie Malamed: [00:24:58] As I mentioned, I do see more value in community than ever before. I also know that I can't learn everything. So, really, I'm a believer in that my network of knowledge includes my friends and acquaintances who know a lot about different fields. So, in some ways, I may have given up about trying to learn endlessly and become expert in gaming. If I have a question about games or someone asks me a question, I just ask Karl Kapp, right? And it's made my life slightly simpler to just accept the fact that I cannot be an expert in all of the diverse areas. So I always recommend to people pick the ones that fascinate you. I'll be fascinated with the cognitive psychology and visual design forever, so I can just zero in on that. And then there's Patti Shank with all of her research and putting things out there. And Julie Dirksen. And so there's so many people that I can go to and ask questions, and I don't need to know it all. It's wonderful.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:05] Well, and I have to note, too, that each of those people you mentioned has been on the Leading Learning Podcast. And one of the realizations I've come to more and more lately is being an expert now, really, is about cultivating and curating a network of expertise. You might have your core contribution to that network, as you're saying, visual design. But if, for example, you're going to be an e-learning expert broadly, that's just about impossible for a single person to truly be an e-learning expert these days. You have to have your Julies and your Karls and your Pattis that you can reach out to and pull together as you're trying to advise others and use your expertise to help others learn.

Connie Malamed: [00:26:47] It's amazing that other people can be part of your network of knowledge.

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Celisa Steele: [00:27:00] Connie Malamed leads a membership community at MasteringID.com and writes and podcasts about all things learning as the eLearning Coach. You can find links to her sites and to her Twitter account in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode324.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:18] At leadinglearning.com/episode324, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we would be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet. Subscriptions give us some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:31] We'd also be grateful if you would rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you find the Leading Learning Podcast valuable. Jeff and I personally would appreciate it, and ratings and reviews help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a rating.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:50] Lastly, please help us grow the Leading Learning community by spreading the good word. At leadinglearning.com/episode324, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:28:02] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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