



Tool Talk: Learning Culture and Learning Ecosystem Snapshots

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 326

Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] If we're going to really support lifelong learning rather than just being in the education business or the events business, if we are in fact going to lead learning in the fields and industries we serve, then we have to understand and address each learner's need in context and over time. And we must understand that we have some ability to not just react to context but also to influence and shape that context.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:35] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:36] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:45] Welcome to episode 326 of the Leading Learning Podcast. This is the sixth episode 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, in episode 318 we covered the Product Value Profile, in episode 320 we covered the MIDDLE ME learning product lifecycle, and in episode 323 we talked about the Learner Engagement Loop.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:17] And you can find links to all of our tool talks in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode326. Today, though, we're going to focus on a set of tools that can help you wrestle with two big concepts: learning culture and learning ecosystem.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:36] And we'll come back to the specific tools we have in mind, but, to use the same why-what-how framework we've used with the other tools in this series, we'll first talk about why the concepts of learning culture and learning ecosystem are important.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:53] Why should you focus on concepts like learning culture and learning ecosystem? These are terms that have been trendy in the corporate L&D world for many years, but they may seem less relevant in the world of market-facing learning businesses where the

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode326.*

audiences we serve are often widely distributed and often seemingly outside of our control—or at least less in our control than the more captive corporate employee is.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:21] Yeah, that's true. It feels easier to talk about culture, for example, within the context of a single, well-defined organization where there are common rules and structures that are understood and shared. And, even when focused on a specific profession or industry, learning businesses serve people from a wide range of organizations that can be very different from each other.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:44] “Ecosystem” too seems like a more manageable term in a corporate environment, particularly because it's often tied to technology systems, and it can feel easier to have control over systems and how they relate to each other in that more defined environment of a single organization.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:03] Now, all of that said, we are encountering more learning businesses that are embracing a learning culture and a learning ecosystem. And we suspect a big part of the reason for that is the evolving understanding of learning and how we as learning businesses and learning leaders can deliver higher value with the experiences we offer.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:26] And core to that shift, core to that evolution is a point that we've made many times before—listeners may even be sick of hearing it—but that is that learning is not an event. It's a process. But that process isn't linear, and it's not isolated. Even our most clearly defined learning experiences happen in interaction with other people and with our environment. And those learning experiences are influenced by countless other processes that may be unfolding in our lives. So, in other words, the learning experiences are embedded in culture and are part of a broader ecosystem.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:07] And then, of course, many, arguably most of our learning experiences are not clearly defined. They emerge organically from the sum of our day-to-day experiences, and most of the focus of learning businesses historically has been on what might be described as “point-in-time solutions”—so things like classes, courses, conference sessions—that are really just mere blips in the overall context of a learner's life and career. But really those blips appear and fade away rapidly and often leave little, if any, trace behind.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:41] If we're going to really support lifelong learning rather than just being in the education business or the events business, if we are in fact going to lead learning in the fields and industries we serve, then we have to understand and address each learner's need in

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode326.*

context and over time. And we must understand that we have some ability to not just react to context but also to influence and shape that context.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:11] To put that a little differently, we now have much more ability to foster ecosystems that in turn influence and foster culture among the audiences we serve. Advances in technology have played a major role in this shift. I mean, the sheer increase in our ability to reach and connect with learners has just changed the learning landscape permanently, and the emergence of things like artificial intelligence and the possibilities for personalization are also going to leave an indelible mark.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:41] But we should be clear that simply implementing better technology isn't going to carry us into the future of learning. The key is in our relationships with and to our learners and with the sense of vision and purpose that we bring to our work. These are the factors that should drive how we think about both learning culture and learning ecosystem and how we work to shape them.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:09] 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.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:42] Now that we've explored why a learning culture and a learning ecosystem are such important concepts for learning businesses, let's take a closer look at what they are.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:52] Right. And let's start with learning culture. Culture, broadly speaking, can be defined as a cohesive, integrated, and persistent pattern of knowledge, belief, and behavior exhibited by a group of human beings. Learning can be defined as the lifelong process of transforming information and experience into knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:18] So, combining those two definitions, a learning culture is one in which the process of learning drives the pattern of culture. Learning is among the highest values of the group of people involved, and learning, because it inherently leads to change, enables and drives the evolution of the culture. Put somewhat differently, a learning culture is a culture that clearly values and prioritizes learning, rewards the pursuit of learning, and is therefore able to change, adapt, and evolve as circumstances require.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode326.*

Celisa Steele: [00:07:51] Now, for a learning business, this culture is not confined to a single organization, but it extends out to the broader community, field, or industry the learning business serves. That said, as a prerequisite to supporting the broader culture, the learning business should have a strong internal learning culture. Modeling the desired outcomes is really important. It's crucial, but it's difficult to model things that you have not fully appreciated or integrated into your own practices.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:24] And it's important also to recognize that, while formal education and training can be important elements of a learning culture, there's nothing about learning culture per se that requires formal education and training experiences. Living itself is learning, and participants in a learning culture recognize that equivalence, whether consciously or not. And this recognition shapes their mindset with respect to both life and learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:52] Yeah, definitely. And I do think that too much of a focus on training and education can actually impede a learning culture if those training and education experiences—and the credit associated with them—evolve to act as a proxy for true, meaningful learning. Simply putting in the time or checking the box for a formal, structured educational activity might be perceived as learning, but, in reality, maybe very little is gained from that experience. Maybe that's because it's not very relevant to the learner. Maybe it's because the learner is not motivated or some other reason.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:29] Finally, a true learning culture is never fixed or static. It's emergent, representing the continuing accumulation of interactions within the culture, the emergence of patterns. And, because this is the case, learning culture can't really be prescribed or dictated. It can only be influenced and fostered. And, equally important, learning culture by its very nature requires social interaction and community. Those seeking to influence and foster a learning community must be meaningful participants in these interactions and community wherever they arise.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:06] So that covers learning culture. Now let's talk about what a learning ecosystem is.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:12] An ecosystem in nature is a community of living beings interacting with each other and their environment. And, when healthy, it's characterized by balance and an innate understanding that no single part of the system is more important than any other and

that changes in one part of the ecosystem may impact multiple other parts of the ecosystem, whether directly or indirectly.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:41] And I think ecosystem is an apt metaphor to apply to learning, given that learning is also fundamentally about interactions among human beings and between human beings and their environment or context. We have the ability to shape and influence a learning ecosystem through decisions about the people involved, the substance of the learning experiences that we offer, and the tools and technologies that we use to support and connect those two—the people and those learning experiences. And so, from this perspective, a learning ecosystem is comprised of people, content, technology, and then the processes and strategies that unite them.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:25] It's important to recognize, though, the whole of a learning ecosystem is greater than the sum of its parts. Learning culture emerges from a learning ecosystem while simultaneously influencing and impacting that ecosystem, and, just as culture is dynamic and evolving, the ecosystem too is dynamic and evolving. The two concepts really are inseparable from each other. There are two sides of the same coin—or, borrowing from the Irish poet William Butler Yeats, they're as hard to distinguish from each other as the dancer and the dance.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:00] Well, and Jeff, given our shared backgrounds in comparative literature, I think we have to actually quote Yeats here a little bit more fully. The dancer-dance metaphor comes from the end of his famous poem "Among School Children": "O body swayed to music, O brightening glance / How can we know the dancer from the dance?"

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:21] Well, he probably never thought he'd end up in a discussion about learning culture and ecosystem. But W.B. Yeats definitely knew a thing or two about wrestling with complexity and ambiguity. And, that said, while firm control of culture and ecosystem is really impossible, decisions made about an ecosystem—so the components, the processes, the strategy—those do impact the ecosystem's health and, by extension, the health and the efficacy of the learning culture.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:51] Absolutely. As in nature. too much of an emphasis on any one factor—say, a delivery method or a particular approach to learning—that emphasis could negatively impact the whole. So learning ecosystem decisions need to always be made with the desired outcomes in mind, and those desired outcomes might include the desired learning culture.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode326.*

Celisa Steele: [00:13:24] We've covered why and what, so let's turn to how to foster a learning culture and a learning ecosystem.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:32] And this is where our tools for this episode come in, and these are basically simple frameworks and visuals to help you introduce and operationalize the concepts of learning culture and learning ecosystem in your organization and among its stakeholders.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:49] And, as with many of our tools, these are useful as a way to get meaningful conversations started. They can provide common points of reference for communicating key concepts, and they can help you and your team move from amorphous ideas into concrete action.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:06] So let's start with ecosystem. As we noted earlier, people, content, and technology are the components at the core of a learning ecosystem. In order to make decisions about these components, decisions that are going to influence and shape the ecosystem, you need to be clear about what they are. For people, you need to list out the key stakeholder groups involved, from the learners to staff to subject matter experts to partners, regulators, and anyone else who plays an important role in your learning ecosystem.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:41] Similarly, for content, you're going to want to list out all the different types of learning content that you provide or that you aspire to provide in the coming years. So this could include traditional formal activities like online courses, Webinars, conference sessions, but you might also include less formal items like social or community interactions.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:06] And then, for technology, you're going to want to list out the various types of technology that are or will be a part of your desired learning ecosystem. This list is typically going to contain things like your learning management system, or LMS, your Webinar platforms, but it's also likely to need to include platforms like, say, a CRM, a customer relationship management system, or a membership management system, as well as things like search tools, search engines, social networks, and other tools that may interface with your core learning technologies.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:40] In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode326, we include a sample learning ecosystem snapshot, and the snapshot has sample lists for each of these areas and three boxes. And then around those boxes we've drawn arrows to reflect that these components are surrounded by the strategies and processes that enable and inform them.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode326.*

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:04] And we've also included our definition of learning ecosystem in the visual. And then, collectively, these elements comprise an example that you can use to create your own snapshot, as a conversation starter and communication tool around this whole concept of consciously creating a learning ecosystem. And you can use the sample learning ecosystem snapshot to help you make your own. Yours might look different, but we think it's useful and powerful to have a short document that provides a snapshot of your learning ecosystem.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:38] We've done something similar with learning culture. In this case, we've taken four questions that we feel contribute to effectively defining and guiding learning culture. And those four questions are: What is learning culture? Why is building a learning culture important? What does a learning culture look like? What actions are essential for building a learning culture? These are the questions that you and your team will need to reflect on and discuss and answer for the specific context of your learning business. And, in many cases, you're going to need to do some research and outreach to your broader stakeholder base to help you arrive at well-informed and accurate answers to those questions.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:24] And so in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode326, we offer a learning culture snapshot, a one-pager that shows you what organizing and presenting these answers might look like. And, again, this is an example that you can use to inform your own approach. You might be more or less ambitious in creating these types of snapshots, but we do think that having some sort of attractive, clear, relatively short documentation of how your organization is approaching its learning culture and its learning ecosystem is important to ensuring your success.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:02] And, with your success in mind, we want to offer some quick thoughts about engaging your organization in this whole endeavor of fostering a learning culture and ecosystem. Now, we recognize, of course, that very few learning businesses are going to be starting from a blank slate with respect to either culture or ecosystem. There are usually already going to be some elements in place, both in the learning business and in the broader community or field or industry that that learning business serves. And so the challenge and the opportunity is to do the work to assess your current culture and ecosystem, to do the work to establish a vision for the desired future state of your culture and ecosystem, and then to consciously set about the work of influencing each of those in a positive direction and thereby elevating the range, the relevance, and the quality of the learning experiences available to each individual learner.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode326.*

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:04] Now, for most learning businesses, this is going to require a pretty significant shift in mindset across the stakeholder base, not only staff, board members, and volunteers but also learners themselves. Very often in the world of adult lifelong learning, we tend to be very validation-centric, viewing primarily those experiences associated with, for example, continuing education credit or certification or other forms of credit as valid learning experiences. And this bias is usually unconscious, but it tends to conflate and confuse education and learning, and that's usually to the detriment of learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:45] As an initial step toward prioritizing learning ecosystem and learning culture, that bias, Jeff, that you just mentioned really needs to be made conscious. And, again, that needs to happen across the stakeholder base. And organizations need to make a much more conscious effort to support less formal opportunities as well as opportunities that aren't necessarily one-size-fits-all, which can be the case with many continuing education and professional development opportunities.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:15] Now, none of this is to say that there's not a place for traditional formal approaches. Of course there is. But rather it's a call for a significant shift in emphasis and a recognition that, while those formal educational experiences certainly can and should play a key role in supporting a learning culture, an excessive focus on them can make it difficult to really realize the full potential of those other less formal elements as well as to personalize experiences to the needs of individual learners.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:46] For most organizations, gathering the right group of people—and usually this is going to be a combination of staff, key volunteers (if you use volunteers), and some representative learners—gather those people, and then ask the question, “How else, beyond what we have traditionally done, could we foster and support learning for the people we serve?” Just doing that, gathering those people, asking that question can be a simple but very powerful first step toward shifting mindset and beginning to identify the opportunities that a focus on learning ecosystem and learning culture can represent.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:26] So, if you're interested in successfully navigating and leading the future of learning in your community, field, or industry, we encourage you to not put this off. Go ahead and put the wheels in motion to gather those people, ask that question, that single question, today, and use that as the basis for starting to put together these snapshots that we've been talking about.

*This transcript accompanies the episode of the Leading Learning Podcast
available at www.leadinglearning.com/episode326.*

Celisa Steele: [00:21:56] So that's our look at learning culture and learning ecosystem. You can find the sample snapshots we referenced in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode326.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:08] At leadinglearning.com/episode326, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we hope you will subscribe if you haven't yet. We like subscription numbers because they give us some insight into how effective the podcast is in the learning ecosystem and culture that we're striving to cultivate.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:26] 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 appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:42] Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning in the show notes at leadinglearning.com/326, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:22:53] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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