



LX Strategy with Bucky Dodd

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 327

Bucky Dodd: [00:00:00] And so I think we are going to see a greater focus on strategy. I think we're going to see a greater focus on the intentionality of design with the challenge not being necessarily how do we produce this media or how do we create this video. We figured that out, right? We sort of innovated through that process, but it's how do we do it in effective ways?

Celisa Steele: [00:00:24] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:26] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:35] Welcome to episode 327, which features a conversation with Dr. Bucky Dodd, a return guest. Bucky is passionate about helping people learn and designing world-class learning experiences. He serves as assistant vice president for education, strategy, and innovation with LX Studio at the University of Central Oklahoma. Bucky created Learning Environment Modeling, a visual collaboration system for the design and evaluation of learning experiences, and he's published a playbook called "Supercharge Your Webinar Strategy," which explores five specific strategies for better Webinars. Jeff and Bucky talk about learning environments, learning experience design, learning campaigns, and a strategic approach to creating better Webinar experiences. Jeff and Bucky spoke in September 2022.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:35] So you are at the University of Central Oklahoma, so located in an academic institution, but I know you're also part of LX Studio, which is, I think, both inward- and outward-facing. Maybe you could talk a little bit about your role at the University of Central Oklahoma and then what you're doing with LX Studio.

Bucky Dodd: [00:01:55] Yeah, absolutely. So LX Studio and the University of Central Oklahoma are really a very unique dynamic there. So LX Studio is a part of the university, so we're affiliated and part of the university itself, but we do serve an innovation function inward facing, working with faculty, staff, and administrators and really helping them come up with the best ways of thinking about how we reach new audiences. And part of that is also thinking and

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working externally as well with partners really from across industries, many of them in associations, many of them in agencies and things like that, who are really trying to engage adults and people in the process of learning, whatever that might look like for their organization. And so the aspect of LX Studio is really unique in that way, in that we get to serve this sort of consulting function in many ways but really be that partner with them through that process of change and transformation and reaching the audiences that they're trying to reach.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:52] And I know your work is driven by a focus on learning experience design as well as by the concept of learning environment. We talked about both of those before, you and Celisa did in the previous conversation, and we'll definitely be sure to link to that conversation. But, just to make sure that we're on the same page with current listeners, can you tell us more about what those concepts mean to you? And then I'd also be interested in how you're thinking about them may have evolved as we've had this really massive shift to online learning of different varieties during the pandemic.

Bucky Dodd: [00:03:28] Yeah, absolutely. So when we think about a learning environment, the best example that I often use to talk about this concept is to think about our roles in formal education settings, right? So maybe when we walked into a classroom, either in elementary or college or whatever that might be for us, oftentimes those desks are set up in rows. There are certain things at the front of the room, the back of the room, and that environment cues us, if you will, to what should happen in that space. So, if you take that example and then you compare it to what we might experience in a coffee shop with a close friend, we're thinking about conversation. We're thinking about collaboration and working together. Those two environments are very different in the way that learning happens within them. And so a lot of my work over the years has really been shaped on what is the effect that a learning environment, those spaces and places where people learn affect the learning experiences that we have. And it's a really, I think, empowering concept for many designers and leaders in that sometimes it can be easy to think about, well, we can't affect anything, right? We can't do anything about the experience. But really we do have a lot of agency in terms of how we design the environments, whether they be our workplaces or learning situations or even just informal digital spaces like social media, that can have a profound impact on how learning experiences happen and how people engage in that process.

Bucky Dodd: [00:04:55] Now you bring up probably one of the most profound shifts in learning that any of us have encountered in our own lives over the last few years. And when we think about the environments for where learning historically, we tend to think a lot about the physical spaces and in the formal context, right? What happens in a classroom or a workshop or

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something like that. And almost overnight we had to shift into all these other dimensions of that learning environment, right? The digital space, of course, but also looking more intentionally at the informal side of learning. We saw many associations and higher education organizations really begin thinking about how do we engage our audiences, not just in a formal sense, like what we have been, but really be that social connection to them in a time where people were needing that. They were needing that aspect of learning. And, at least from my point of view, that really opened a lot of people's eyes that we weren't just there to deliver content, but we were there to really create these rich, vibrant experiences where learning can happen and can thrive.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:04] I think that is so important, and I'm not sure I've consciously thought about it in the way you put it, that education providers had to start thinking about how they filled that social role where there was such a gap during the pandemic. Now, of course, we're seemingly emerging from the pandemic. I'm not going to be somebody who says it's over because there still seems to be plenty of evidence that there's stuff going on out there that we still need to be concerned about, but things have gotten better. More organizations are going back to face-to-face, and a lot of them are wrestling with what now? Because we have this huge shift online. We have this pent-up demand for face-to-face, but we know online works. We've had some success with it. Now we've got concepts like blended learning, and we've got concepts like hybrid events. So what are you seeing organizations wrestle with the most when it comes to now thinking about learning environments and that whole concept of designing learning experiences?

Bucky Dodd: [00:07:00] Yeah, well, it's a, I think, a really exciting time actually. Some people may use a different adjective to describe where we're at in this, but I think it's exciting. And from the standpoint that we are in the wake of, I believe, some tremendous innovation that organizations have done right. They pivoted into reaching audiences in new ways. In the process of doing that, they've created a lot of what one of my favorite authors, Steven Johnson, about innovation talks about is the spare parts, right? They've got Webinars. They've got guide sheets. They've got all these different things that they innovated and created in the moment. But I think it's an opportunity now where we can zoom out, and we can think about how we best use those assets and those experiences in really intentional ways. And so I think we are going to see a greater focus on strategy. I think we're going to see a greater focus on the intentionality of design with the challenge not being necessarily how do we produce this media or how do we create this video. We figured that out, right? We sort of innovated through that process, but it's how do we do it in effective ways? And we're seeing a lot of people, at least that I talk with, saying we've got all this—for lack of a better term—stuff, right? A real scientific term.

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Bucky Dodd: [00:08:15] But how do we really relook at that understanding and look at it from a perspective of quality, that we know that it can be done maybe more effectively. We learned some things. And so there's this really iterative process, I believe, that we're seeing, and I think it's a really healthy thing. It reminded us that we're never done learning, even ourselves. We always have to continue improving, and we can bring other people along the way with us. I also think that our audiences have given us a little bit of grace in that process as well. They recognize that, just like them, people who are involved in that process had to step into the unknown for a little bit. And that means that not everything goes perfectly. And so it also means that we can learn, and maybe the feedback and the engagement that we have from people will really elevate the overall level of community innovation. And I think that's a really exciting aspect of where we are now in this unpredictable journey, shall we say.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:17] 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: [00:09:51] Are you seeing organizations really think about their portfolio more holistically? You mentioned like guidebooks and Webinars. I mean, most learning businesses have all sorts of different types of content. It can be their Web pages. It may even be their social media channels, their events. Obviously, there are online courses. All of that stuff. In the past, a lot of that has been really siloed. You've got your publications people. You got your events people. You got your education people. And there's been a need to say, okay, we don't want to be duplicating each other all over the place. And there might be some ways that these different types of contents and experiences actually complement and add value to each other. And maybe we need to pull back and look at that more strategically. Am I being idealistic there, or are you seeing organizations start to think that way a little bit more?

Bucky Dodd: [00:10:36] I think you're right on. I think we're seeing that people know they have something there. They've got these assets that are across their organization. They really had to come together during that time to just keep the lights on, so to speak. And that product of positive collaboration and innovation, I think, will continue to find its ways. A concept I'm really excited about right now is actually this concept of learning campaigns. We tend to spend or historically have spent a lot of time thinking about what happens in a learning management

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system, and those will certainly be continued parts of what we do. We can't completely remove ourselves from that tool in the process. But what I think it does do is allows how do we connect technologies and digital strategies in a way that meet people where they are and recognizing that that can be very different from across industries. What are their watering holes, so to speak, and how do we help to reach them in convenient, timely, meaningful ways? And that means drawing in from resources from across an organization. I love the concept of "What's the strategy?" Well, it's whatever it takes. Understanding where the learner is, and then how do we design in ways that really add value to them?

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:47] And I love the use of the word "campaigns" there. We often draw parallels between marketing and education. Both are about fundamentally about helping people change their knowledge and their behavior in some way, shape, or form. And they use a lot of the same tools to do that. And, of course, campaigns are a mainstay of marketing. You say we want to accomplish this with this audience. Here's how we're going to do it over time with these elements to engage with them and change their knowledge and change their behavior. Educators have to do exactly the same thing.

Bucky Dodd: [00:12:14] Absolutely. We tend a lot of times in education to think about learning as an event, which is really short-sighted. And I think thinking about campaigns or experiences or broad strategies that bring people together is a much more well-rounded way of thinking about that than just what happens in a workshop or a conference or something like that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:35] Right, right. Now there are a lot of areas we could cover here. And you referenced like the assets that organizations tend to have in their portfolio. One that has always played a big role—played a huge role during the pandemic, is going to continue to play a role, whether we're talking about a single event or these campaigns we were just referencing—is Webinars. These are, of course, a type of learning environment. They can be used in relation to other types of learning and blended and hybrid type activities. You led a really useful session on creating better Webinar experiences at the recent ASAE, American Society of Association Executives, annual meeting. I was fortunate enough to be there. I will say it was a standing-room-only session, which tells me that people are interested in this. They are concerned about the quality of their Webinars and how can they provide a better Webinar experience. And I want to dig into that in some detail here for listeners. But, just to frame it, I'm wondering at this point, how would you describe the current state of Webinars in this emerging-from-the-pandemic world?

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Bucky Dodd: [00:13:37] Yeah, so, you know, Webinars were really interesting at the start of the pandemic because they were a very accessible way and a quick and affordable way rather to reach audiences. And so what that meant, though, was that most of what we saw was a transfer of what would happen in a classroom. Think of a lot of slides and talking heads and things like that migrated over into a digital environment. And there are some things that are okay about that. There are other opportunities that emerge that we can leverage technology potentially in more transformative ways. So I think it invites us to think about what is the best value that we can exchange from that type of experience, a Webinar experience. But what are the other options that we have around that, right? How do we prime learning potentially before a Webinar with a short, recorded video or a checklist or something like that? How do we continue to support application of learning following a Webinar? And then, probably most transformative, what do we do during that lifetime that adds the most value? And so I think that there is opportunities where we begin to emerge into that process, and we say, what could be? What if we did these sorts of things? And leveraging the technology will continue to advance. It'll get better, but not letting that technology drive the threshold of our innovation. And sometimes the tools that are designed to do something else could be a perfect catalyst for doing something that we're trying to accomplish. I'll give an example. So many of our listeners may be familiar with the Articulate course authoring. One of those tools is Rise, where you can create mobile learning and things of that nature. I actually use Rise for agendas. I'll create an agenda for a workshop, and it's something I can add to things on the fly. There can be different engagement things. And so where that tool is designed for something entirely different, it's actually a fantastic way of engaging people in the way of helping them understand what is coming next in a Webinar or workshop or whatever it is that we're doing. So those types of models, particularly around Webinars, we're just at the beginning of really, I think, a new wave of that innovation that will come forward with it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:53] Yeah, and I like that question of what could be and to really engage with that question. And I know, too, with respect to Rise that I believe it's what you used to create a great playbook around Webinars, which we'll talk about here in just a minute. But, before we get to that, all of this is about being more strategic with these types of experiences, with the environment that a Webinar provides for and what you can kind of put around that environment. And I know you've created a strategy canvas to help people think through this, help them visualize what they might be able to do with a Webinar as a learning environment. I assume you probably use this with other learning environments as well, but we'll talk about it specifically with Webinars. Now, we're not in a visual medium right here, so people can't see this canvas, but I bet they'll get it pretty easily if you can talk about it a little bit. So could you just describe the strategy canvas that you would use for a Webinar and how that works?

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Bucky Dodd: [00:16:46] Absolutely. One of the things, before I talk about the dimensions of the canvas, let me mention why that canvas is so important. Oftentimes when we are designing learning experiences or really designing anything, so much of the design process happens in an invisible way. It happens in our mind. It happens when we talk to one another. But we really, without intentionality, we hit this barrier when we're trying to work on a problem together. And so this canvas is a visual tool that really helps multiple people come together and problem-solve and think strategically, as you mentioned. And so this canvas is made up of a few visual dimensions, sort of segments, if you will. And so we start by thinking about what are the desired results, really working from the end in mind. Backward design. Many of our listeners have probably encountered that or been involved with essentially starting with the end result and working backwards to that. And so then we start thinking about, well, what is the evidence of learning? What do we want the learner to be able to produce or do or show that learning has happened? And these two elements between where we want to go and the prove-it element of it, of the evidence, is a really important dimension for us to ensure that is aligned. And so there are visual segments in the canvas that help to articulate that and really help people get to a consensus about what that is. And then we have some other elements in the canvas that are all based on a system called Learning Environment Modeling language, which is essentially a visual framework for designing learning experiences.

Bucky Dodd: [00:18:17] So we talk about things like how do we promote practice in the learning experience? How do we intentionally design for feedback moments in the learning experience? How do we have dialog that is going on in there? And then finally, but often is used as the most important thing by many groups is what information is delivered. And we actually look at that information as not necessarily a secondary element, but more as a supporting element, right? That information does not equal learning. And so as we think about these design elements, we have to blend those, right? The other elements of the canvas that you'll see is an emphasis on the value proposition. And this is actually a been an area that I've really been interested in and been doing a lot of work on lately of how do we design value propositions for learning experiences that matter. And it's an area that we historically have not spent as much time on that we probably should. And so I think that is, you know, that's an element that's included in there that's important. And then we have sort of a visual compass, if you will, that helps us to articulate the blend of the learning environment. Right. Whether it's digital, if it's in person, if it's formal and informal and so forth. And so this visual canvas gives us a one page or a visual medium to collaborate together on, bring people together, and ultimately think strategically about the design of webinar learning experiences or as you mentioned, really any learning experience that's there.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:19:40] Right. And there are a few things I'll call out there, and it's very rich, but we love any—we tend to refer to them as social learning objects—something like a canvas, or it could be a bar chart, whatever it is, that people can focus on together. And it helps to stimulate and focus conversation in a way that you just don't get if you're abstractly talking about how do we make our Webinars better or how do we make X better. And then the idea of value. We've emphasized value for years and years around how are you articulating and showing your audience that you deliver value with specific learning experiences and overall as a learning business. And then the evidence because impact is so important. It's getting more important. Learners want to know, if they're going to participate in a learning experience, "How do I know this is going to do something for me?" Employers want to know that. So being clear about how you're going to show that in the end is just so, so important.

Jeff Cobb: [00:20:42] Now you have developed, I know, five focused, specific strategies for better Webinars and have put these together in a playbook. And we'll definitely include the canvas as a visual in the show notes for this so folks can see what we're talking about. Again, I think it's pretty intuitive, but you'll be able to actually look at it and understand an example of this. We're also going to link to this playbook that you've created, which you've used an e-learning, typical e-learning tool, the e-learning tool Rise to create, but it covers five strategies that the listeners can use for better Webinars. We're not going to be able to dive deeply into each of those five strategies, but could you give a few highlights of those, what they are and the key points?

Bucky Dodd: [00:21:25] Yeah, absolutely. So we created the playbook from the point of view of an association or an organization that has some Webinars. They have an experience with them, but how do they level up? How do they take it to the next level of innovation there? And so we started with some basic ones of how to just enhance what you're currently doing. Maybe you include some maybe new ways of getting feedback or dialog, things along those lines. So you could start there. That's an easy turnkey opportunity to begin leveling up your Webinars. And then we took step by step in more sophisticated ways. So we said, let's say you have some recorded content, how do you maybe reproduce or in post-production leveraging that content you already have and transforming it in ways that are effective, maybe asynchronous learning experiences? And so we talk about learning campaigns. We talked about the blended approach. And so it really is a way for someone, an education leader who has done some Webinars to really explore and go down that innovation pathway at their own pace, at their own comfort level and really explore maybe some new ideas. And we would encourage people, as they're using this tool, not to just think about these as defined recipes, but get creative. Maybe you

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want to add some more basil to it, or you want to add some more vanilla to the cake. Go ahead and explore that innovation way, but look at it from a framework of a starting point, and that can often be a really powerful tool when we are thinking about changing or innovating or improving the learning experiences that are there.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:02] Well, again, we will be sure to link to the playbook in the show notes for this episode, which I highly recommend folks go and check out. It's a great little learning experience in and of itself and something for listeners to model potentially how they can complement some of their own learning experiences. We'll also make sure that that visual for the strategy canvas is there so that folks know how to work with that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:23:24] Before we wrap up, though, whenever we have guests on the show—all of our guests are involved in the world of learning. I know you in particular are just so focused on what is a high-quality learning experience, what are high-quality learning environments. You do that for other people, for organizations and learning leaders, help them to think through that. I'm wondering for yourself and your own approach to lifelong learning, how do you actively identify and shape the learning experiences, the learning environments that are going to be most valuable to you? And has any of that changed as a result of what's happened over the course of the last few years?

Bucky Dodd: [00:24:03] Yeah, well, I think in order for us to be good designers of learning experiences for other people, we have to first be good designers of learning experiences for ourselves. And that's understanding how we design our own learning environments to think strategically, stretch ourselves. It's really easy to be comfortable in these sorts of things. And so we have to step out into areas that we maybe haven't before. And so I think an area that I have really been interested in and focused on—it was actually influenced by a recent book actually I read called *The Upside of Uncertainty*. And this book really goes through a number of mental models that try to reframe our thinking about uncertainty. And oftentimes when we hear even the word “uncertainty,” we get anxious, or it's almost perceived as a bad thing. But this book actually was really an interesting way of at least helping me reframe my own thinking. Uncertainty is really an opportunity, right? If we're ever going to create something new, or we're ever going to grow our organization, or we're ever going to invest in new opportunities, at some point we're going to have to traverse uncertainty. It is a given.

Bucky Dodd: [00:25:16] And so to be able to apply some of those thinking to learning and the design of learning experiences, recognizing that our learners are at that moment too. If they're sitting in front of a course or a workshop or something that we've designed, they are literally at

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the ledge of uncertainty. And our role as educators and leaders and designers is to help them traverse that canyon, if you will. And so, for me, I've been giving a lot of thought recently to that concept and how that gets embedded not only in what we design but how we design, and the concepts and the visual tools and the social tools, as you mentioned, are really at the crux of how we help engage groups in that process of designing in what is a very uncertain world.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:05] *The Upside of Uncertainty*. We'll make sure that we link to that book in the show notes. But I think that is so true, and I increasingly think of designing learning experiences as really designing stories, helping people to walk through a story. Just about any good story has that plot twist where there's uncertainty, and you have to get a resolution around that uncertainty, and thinking about learning experiences that way, and how are you helping that learner navigate that story that's going to get them to those learning outcomes that you want to start the strategy canvas with? What are you trying to achieve? How are you telling that story? How are you helping them be a part of that story and traverse that uncertainty? I love that that perspective on it.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:54] Dr. Bucky Dodd is assistant vice president for education strategy and innovation with LX Studio at the University of Central Oklahoma. You can find links to the LX Studio site and his LinkedIn profile in the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode327.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:13] At leadinglearning.com/episode327, you'll also see options for subscribing to the podcast, and we'd be grateful if you would subscribe if you haven't yet, as subscriptions give us some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:26] 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 appreciate reviews and ratings, and they 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: [00:27:45] Lastly, please help us grow the Leading Learning community by spreading the good word. At leadinglearning.com/episode327, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:58] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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

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