



Reflections on 2022

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 335

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Where have we just been assuming and counting on the fact that people know, like, and trust us, that they know that we're experts, they know that we have authority, that they can trust us to have that? Where have we been assuming that where it may not necessarily be true?

Celisa Steele: [00:00:17] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:18] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:27] Welcome to episode 335 of the Leading Learning Podcast. The end of December is within easy sight, and so we want to spend a little time here at the end of the year for reflection and take a look back at 2022, particularly with an eye to what we learned, both formally and informally.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:45] And we're sharing our reflections as a reminder and encouragement to you, dear listener, to make some time to reflect on your own and with your team. Reflection is a good practice, but it's easy to forget or put low on the priority list—or at least it is for me—because there isn't necessarily a concrete outcome from reflection. But reflection is an important activity for a learning business like the one you and other listeners are in. And Jeff and I are part of a learning business ourselves, and so we'll try to model the kind of behavior and reflection that we encourage others to engage in.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:21] So maybe we should start out by looking at some of the major milestones for Tagoras in 2022, Tagoras being the parent company of Leading Learning. And we did have a few pretty big milestones.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:35] That's right. The one that pops to mind immediately is the fact that we hit 15 years in business as Tagoras in 2022, and that was a significant achievement. And if you put together the other companies that we've been part of—we were thinking about it prior to hitting record on this—and it was 2001 that we started our first company together. So we've

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been involved in learning and learning technology and the development of learning offerings for a long time at this point.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:06] That's right. We were working together before that, even in the mid '90s, back in those dotcom days. And to hit 15 years—I don't remember the statistics right off the top of my head, but I know the number of startup businesses that make it past five years, much less make it to 15 years is quite small. So we're really grateful for all of the organizations that have worked with us over the years and for all the listeners out there who listen to the podcast, who come to our Webinars, who read the newsletter—those are all part of our business. There is revenue associated with all of them. That's what keeps us going. So we're extremely grateful, and that does feel like a big one.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:49] Now, we did not have the podcast when we got started 15 years ago. That's something that we've added in the interim. We also didn't have the Leading Learning brand when we got started 15 years ago. When we got our start, it really was a focus on consulting services and offering those to learning businesses.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:08] That's true. We've evolved a lot since then. Obviously, consulting is still very core to what we do, but we have built up followers for, as you mentioned, the podcast, the Webinars, everything we do. We have other lines of business now too that we focus on. Many listeners are probably not aware of, for example, our learningrevolution.net site where we help experts who want to take advantage of what's now possible in sharing their expertise with the world. And that's been a very fast-growing part of our business for the past few years and continues to grow.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:41] So 15 years in business, that's a big milestone. Another milestone that I see when I look in our rearview mirror is the fact that we've added more staff. We've grown our numbers in 2022.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:52] That's true because it was just you and I at the start. But then, several years ago, Jackie Harman did join us part time, and she's been working with us on projects like the Leading Learning Podcast and the events we've held. And she's been instrumental in the growth of learningrevolution.net, and she joined us full time at the beginning of 2022, after being part time for so long. And, of course, also joining us full time was Josh Goldman, which happened a little bit earlier, but who is now director of our consulting services.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:26] That's right. He joined in 2021. But the fact that he joined in 2021 meant that this year, 2022, we added another consultant. We had Krispin Nelson come and join us on the Tagoras team.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:40] That's right. We're getting older, and we're getting bigger at the same time, though, we're still committed to being the right size of company. We're not growing just for the sake of growing. There are things that we feel it's important to do in ways that we want to serve the audience that we serve. To the extent that that requires more people, there will be more people. But we're not going to grow just for the sake of growth.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:02] And so, if we think about the fact that we hit that 15 years in business and that we now have more staff more than just you and me, Jeff, that leads to the third thing that I think about when I look at 2022 from a Tagoras lens. And that's the fact that we've started putting time and effort against getting more buttoned-up, being more reliable and predictable and, therefore, more viable in all that we do.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:29] That's right. If you were a fly on the wall around here lately—or maybe it's a fly in a Zoom session these days, I don't know—but you'd hear a lot of talk about systems and procedures and structure and just getting everything well-aligned so that, as we do consider more growth and as we continue to evolve as a company, it's clear how we do things and who's accountable for the things that we do.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:57] That's right. Accountability and also really clear focus. When it's not just you and me, we need to make sure that everyone on the team really has the same goals in mind. And so that's also part of what we're doing in terms of these efforts to get more buttoned-up. So those are some of the milestones from Tagoras—the 15 years in business, adding more staff, and then these efforts to get buttoned-up. But I think it would also be interesting to talk about some bigger-picture moments from 2022, if we look broadly at society and the world and what's going on.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:34] Yeah, and I think it's still true that probably the star of the show, though the star is now fading a little bit, is COVID. We're now supposedly emerging from the COVID pandemic. It's not so fully center stage, but I think it's still clearly factoring into decisions even at this point.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:55] Yes, I think so. And I think that there are a lot of decisions and the way that people make decisions that will carry forward from the pandemic. I think, for example, that people are likely to make decisions about whether they're going to travel much closer to the

date of when they will travel, if they're going to. If you think about something like a place-based conference, I think those decisions are going to come later and later. And I think that may continue just because people aren't sure exactly how big a star COVID still is, and they want to be able to potentially stay home if numbers are spiking. I think that people are also going to be thinking about does it make sense to gather in person? COVID aside, we saw during the pandemic that you can do very important, good work online together. And so there's just this question of is this something I really do need to be there in person for? And I think people will be asking that question of themselves and maybe of their team members, those that they manage, and that may impact what people choose to do going forward.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:05] Yeah, I think it's going to continue to impact, for example, how employers think about whether they're hiring people to come into an office, whether they're still keeping that office space or not, and what the makeup of those teams and where those people are physically looks like going forward. And that's one thing that's on employers' minds. It's on everybody's minds. Going along with that is the state of the economy right now as we are wrapping up the year.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:32] Yeah, I think there's a lot of uncertainty, a lot of shakiness in the economy. I'm not an economist. I don't even play one on TV. But it doesn't take much awareness to hear all the conversations and concerns about inflation, about the food costs that are soaring. And that has really direct impact on what people are able to spend and willing to spend on things.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:57] Yeah, and I feel like, when I was younger, inflation was a thing. You heard about inflation fairly often. I feel like we just have not been hearing much about inflation for years because it just hasn't been much. But now it's back. Now interest rates that were so low or zero for so long are coming back up again. The stock market, you basically have to put your blinders on and hope for the best at this point, if you've got 401(k) accounts and that sort of thing, and just stick it out for the long haul. And, of course, we've got things going on in the background, like the war in Ukraine is spiking energy costs that, again, will factor back to travel decisions. A lot of things I think are going to impact how travel happens, whether that's for events or for holidays or whatever it is. But yeah, just plenty, plenty out there in the economy right now that is with us in 2022 and is going to carry on over into 2023 with us.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:47] Well, on some of those supply chain issues that started early on in the pandemic, seem like they may be sticking with us as well. We have China and their maybe evolving zero-COVID policy, but that seems to still be impacting supply chain. We'll have to see what the longer-term ramifications of that are. And then, of course, there are renewed

speculations about a recession in the U.S. in 2023. We'll have to see if that pans out or exactly when it does. But, in general, it just seems like the state of the economy is a big question mark.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:21] Definitely a big question mark. Nobody really has the answers—but, of course, there are a lot of people who will act like they have the answers. And that sort of points us to another thing that's going on out there that we've seen evolving over the course of certainly this year and even before this year.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:35] Yeah. We wanted to talk about distrust of expertise and the distrust of large institutions. And I'm thinking as one data point around this is some of the research that the Pew Research Center has done. And they like to track trust in the government. And it was from June of 2022—they came out with their latest findings there. And only two in ten Americans say they trust the government in Washington to do what is right just about always—only 2 percent of people say that—or most of the time—19 percent of people said that. And so you have a lot of distrust in the government. We have things like the challenges to election results. We have misinformation out there in terms of both elections and, getting back to the pandemic, some of the misinformation on that front as well.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:34] And, of course, there were early stumbles with the pandemic around masking or not masking, some of those things that people are looking to experts and saying, "Give me the answers," and they're getting confused. And then they're saying, well, then maybe these experts aren't really worth that much. And the misinformation question, we know now there are algorithms and bots that are helping to spread the misinformation. So it is a huge issue. And we're seeing the people who have traditionally been seen as the backbones of expertise—doctors and other types of professionals. You said earlier you're not an economist. Economists are usually looked to as experts. And, in a lot of cases, those people are being called into question. We'll see doctors or others who are associated with promoting questionable products. It's kind of a mess out there. It's getting harder to distinguish fact from fiction, really.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:29] Well, yeah, and another data point around this is ASAE has included "rejection of expertise" and "declining trust," those two things, among their drivers of change. Those didn't come out in 2022. But I think those predictions or those drivers of change are becoming even more prominent drivers of change. And there was a session at ASAE Annual, right, Jeff?

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:55] There was. I was pleasantly surprised to see it happen, but a group there pulled together a session around this question of expertise because trade and professional associations are often seen as a source of expertise because they're often the home of experts like

doctors and lawyers and accountants and the people we rely on for expert advice, and so, if there's a general distrust in institutions, that can be an issue. And that's what this group was bringing up and looking specifically at. I hope I get the name of the title right—I think it's Tom Nichols, *The Death of Expertise*. And there are a number of books out there like that that are looking at expertise and the decline in our faith. And I think this has often been an American thing, that we have our level of distrust. But I think it's becoming a more global thing, and it's becoming more pronounced.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:44] 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.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:22] We started with a more personal look at 2022 from the Tagoras lens, and then we went bigger picture and talked about more societal issues. I think it could be interesting now if we put those two together and see what we see.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:37] Yeah. So let's go back to COVID and that sort of fading star or, we hope, fading star in the show. We, as representatives of Tagoras, did go back to attending some face-to-face conferences for our own learning and networking in this post-COVID world. So we started doing that in the spring with, I believe, was Learning Solutions the first one? I can't remember.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:59] I believe that was the first one. We also went to CEX.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:04] I managed to go to ASAE Annual, and then I've recently joined a new board of directors, and I went to the annual conference of that organization in Boston recently. And guess what I came back with?

Celisa Steele: [00:15:16] Well, I already know.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:18] The dreaded COVID. And, of course, ironically, this was on the eve of our having plans to hold our own first face-to-face event, admittedly a small one, but we were going to have a gathering in Washington, DC. I came back from this other event and two days later was feeling terrible, and it was close enough to the upcoming event that we ended up having to cancel. So we were foiled in our own efforts so far to return to face-to-face.

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Celisa Steele: [00:15:45] And we do plan to try that event again in the spring. But I think this speaks back to the shaky situation with COVID, and it's just really hard to know when it will be something that you can say you're going to hold an event and hold an event, and there are no issues related to COVID. It still seems like we might be a little bit away from that, especially for something like ours, where it was a small gathering, and the fact that once one or two people can't come, it has a big impact, and it makes it then less viable to gather together. Now, I do think, and this speaks to why we went back to in-person conferences, why we were organizing this event in D.C. is that, despite the potential risks of gathering in person, people still really want to gather in person—or maybe especially want to gather in person after a time away from it. And I think there is potentially real value in gathering together if you can do it in a way that you're really taking advantage of being there together and not just being on Zoom.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:51] Yeah, and I think there's certainly a lot of pent-up demand for that. It was great to get out and see some people that I haven't seen in quite a long time as a result of being able to travel to a physical event. So I was very thankful for that, and that translates into—we already mentioned the change in office environment—organizations becoming more virtual, some deciding to go completely virtual. It just happened serendipitously during the midst of COVID that we had to leave our old office space because the lease was running out, and one of the other tenants was going to take over that space. So we had a decision point. Were we going to actually take on more office space or not? And, in the end, we decided yes.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:34] And I think that speaks to this idea of, even in a world where so much is remote and where work from home is possible, there is, again, value in the physical, and that can mean both gathering together, and it can also just mean the pure space that you have. And I think that even in work-from-home situations, people often find value in making sure that, to the extent that they can, their workspace is somewhat separate from their living space. And so I think just remembering that, even as so much is virtual, the physical spaces and people, that's important as well.

Jeff Cobb: [00:18:08] Yeah, definitely. So that's drawing on COVID and how that's impacted us and some of our reflections on that. And then this whole question of the shaky economy that we're in right now, the uncertainty. Inflation certainly makes you think of the cost side of things. I know that both in our personal lives and business life we're becoming more cost-conscious. And, if you're any sort of business, and this certainly applies to learning businesses, people are going to be looking at cost more. They're going to be looking at price tags more, and they're going to be asking, "Is this really providing something relevant, providing something valuable, providing something useful for me?" So being able to make that case, being able to

demonstrate your value very clearly, to pull people into your offerings is just going to be more important than ever.

Celisa Steele: [00:19:03] Maybe that's on the bad-news side of the equation. On maybe on the good-news side of the equation is that currently we have a lot of job vacancies in the U.S., and I think that can translate to increased demand for onboarding and upskilling and reskilling. And so, if that's something that your learning business offers, there's a potential to really serve an important role in what's going on right now in our economy and be an important help in this work to fill some of these job vacancies and get the right people in the position, get the people having the right knowledge and skills to do their job.

Jeff Cobb: [00:19:41] Yeah, at this point, every learning business ought to really be taking a close look at where that's happening in the particular market that they serve, where those upskilling needs are, where there are likely to be onboarding-type needs as there are shifts in the composition of a trade or a profession or whatever it is that you happen to serve with your learning offerings and then saying, "Okay, what can we offer there? How can we make it as valuable as possible, communicate the value of it effectively?" And if you can do that, if you can connect with that need and really demonstrate and communicate the value of what you're offering, there's a lot of opportunity out there right now for learning businesses.

Celisa Steele: [00:20:19] And so then if we move to that third big-picture item, that distrust of expertise and large institutions, and if we think about some implications from that, one thing that comes to mind for me is that getting good data is even harder. And yet it's so important to still have that good data to help us make good product decisions, good marketing decisions, all of that. But there's, first of all, just so much noise in general. But then now there's this distrust—why are you asking me this? Do I trust you to hold my answers and hold my personal data and keep it safe and keep it private and protected? And so all of that is making it really hard to get good market insight.

Jeff Cobb: [00:21:03] Yeah. And, to your point, having the relationship just counts more than ever now. And it's part of what we're doing strategically as a company going forward is really evaluating that and figuring out, okay, where have we just been assuming and counting on the fact that people know, like, and trust us, that they know that we're experts, they know that we have authority, that they can trust us to have that? Where have we been assuming that where it may not necessarily be true? And we need to invest the time in building new relationships, reinforcing relationships that that we already have so that, when we do want to reach out and say, "Will you help us gather some data?" or "Will you participate in this event or offering with us?," that they're going to be more likely to do that because they've got that trust in us.

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Celisa Steele: [00:21:51] Two things come to mind for me. One is, during this year, during 2022, I feel like the Black Friday, the Cyber Monday, the Giving Tuesday—I was absolutely overwhelmed in my inbox. And so it was really hard for anyone to stand out. And that speaks to this idea of the noise. But, if you can have the relationship that really does help you stand out. I got, for example, on Giving Tuesday, I had so many mass emails. I got one e-mail from a personal friend asking on behalf of a nonprofit, and that's the one that stood out, that I didn't delete right away because there was that relationship there. That was one thing. The other thing that occurred to me while you were talking, Jeff, was that maybe you should talk a little bit about EAT.

Jeff Cobb: [00:22:40] EAT, right. So expertise, authority, and trust, which forms nicely into an acronym, which I know many of our audience are very familiar with the acronym world. So EAT. We mention that for a couple of reasons. It's just a good thing, in general, for your audience to feel like you have the expertise, or maybe you're the conduit to the expertise because you've got the membership, you've got the subject matter experts in your membership, but you can represent that expertise, that you truly have authority, and that you're trustworthy, that you know, you've done your homework, you've got your experience, you've vetted whoever it is that you're putting in front of your audience. All of that is just very important in general. It's also extremely important now just out in the digital world. It's one of the factors that Google mysteriously factors into how it decides it's going to rank Web sites and put information in front of people. And, if you don't have good expertise, authority, and trust in the content that you're putting out there in the world, eventually it's going to hurt you. And, of course, that can be true even if in reality you do have it—if you're not representing that in a believable way digitally, out there where Google and the other search engines can find you, where people can share you on social media, those sorts of things, then you may be defeating your own purposes. So it's something to really pay attention to.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:03] At the outset we said that there isn't necessarily any concrete or preordained outcome from reflection, but I will say that reflection often plays a role in informing future action and future activities.

Jeff Cobb: [00:24:19] Yeah, definitely. We've already mentioned some ways that it's going to impact us in terms of, for example, how we think about relationships going forward. We think about our own expertise, authority, and trust and how we're representing it out there. But the main message is to take some time to reflect on this type of stuff on your own and then with your team. And we'd strongly encourage doing it on your own first so that you're forming some opinions and some thoughts, and everybody's not just nodding at each other and

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engaging in groupthink. When you sit down to have a group reflection session, it's always good to do it individually first.

Celisa Steele: [00:24:53] That's right. So do the thinking on your own, and also ask your team to do the thinking on their own. Then you come together and discuss. And I think then you should also take some additional time to think then about what those reflections suggest about your priorities for the new year. It might give you ideas of what you should double-down on. It might also give you some ideas of things you need to stop doing, things that you might need to sunset.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:30] That's our look back at 2022. At leadinglearning.com/episode335, you'll see options for subscribing to the podcast, and, if you haven't yet, please do subscribe.

Jeff Cobb: [00:25:41] Yes, please do. Those subscription numbers give us some insight into the impact that the podcast is having.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:47] 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 ratings and reviews, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:02] Lastly, please help spread the word about Leading Learning. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode335, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:26:14] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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