Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:00:00] Liberal arts is a terrible term for a great idea.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:09] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:11] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:19] It's an old debate in education, whether learning needs to be *for* something or whether learning in and of itself is of value. Looking at the rise of STEM and the growing focus on skills-based, job-relevant training, one might conclude that the for-something side is winning the debate. And, yet, soft skills and less immediately applicable subjects do endure. In this episode, number 363, Celisa talks with Jeffrey Scheuer about the role of the liberal arts in creating critical thinkers and the essential part critical thinking plays in democracy and community. Jeff argues that critical thinking is a form of community. If this all sounds a little highfalutin, well, so be it. The conversation is more philosophical than some of our other episodes—indeed, philosophy comes up repeatedly as Jeff and Celisa talk—but the conversation is an invitation to consider how individuals we educate and train can then contribute positively and intelligently to society at large. Celisa spoke with Jeff Scheuer in May 2023.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:34] So your most recent book, which was released in March 2023, is titled *Inside the Liberal Arts: Critical Thinking and Citizenship*. So, Jeff, why this book, and why now?

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:01:46] Because I think we need a better understanding of the role, the limits, and the powers of liberal learning in America. We are denigrating it. We are denigrating education in general because we're a strongly anti-intellectual society, but we're specifically denigrating literature, philosophy, the social sciences, and things like that. And especially in the political world, where they don't tend to know very much, they are denigrating anything that's not highly skill-based and highly job-related. That's important, but it's not the best thing for a

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democratic community. So there was room for this book because no one has ever put together, to my knowledge, a comprehensive connecting theory of how liberal learning ties together with critical thinking and with democracy. People commonly say in the academic world, "Liberal learning is for critical thinking," but they don't explain what they mean by either of those terms, much less how they connect to democracy.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:59] And so now's maybe a good time for us to define a couple of the terms that are central to the book, and I'm thinking primarily of "liberal arts" and "critical thinking." I know that you spent a lot of the book defining both of those, so I'm asking you to compress here and then give us an answer for learners to understand what you mean when you think about the liberal arts and what you mean when you're thinking about critical thinking.

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:03:25] Yes. These definitions, because they're vague terms, they're always a little negotiable. They're always a little pliable and overlapping with each other. One can't rigidly define them so that they fit together like crossword puzzle pieces. But that's part of what the liberal arts is all about too. It's about thinking in those flexible ways and seeing how things integrate. That said, a starting point is to say the liberal arts include virtually all non-STEM, non-vocational, non-pre-professional learning, learning that's more theoretical than skill-oriented, more about ideas than immediately practical things like how to fix a machine. As I said, it's amorphous and contested, but I equate it, most of all, with the forms of rationality that we use in society and in schools, forms of rationality that are not explicitly end-related forms, like how to repair a particular machine or how to plant a particular seed or anything that has a very defined end in view.

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:04:48] It's general learning that embraces natural science, social sciences, humanities, the works and involves a lot of thinking. And it's the thinking, it's the critical thinking that I argue is the common thread, really the trunk on which all of these different disciplines grow. And many of them historically come straight out of philosophy, so I'm giving philosophy its due here, and it goes back to the Greeks and ancient philosophy, which is where rationality, as we know it, was first invented. That's not to say there aren't other fields that owe less to Plato and Aristotle, like playwriting, drama, music, and poetry, but most of the modern disciplines need generalizations, need bigger ideas to gain traction on their wider horizons and how they connect with everything else and how knowledge of one kind connects to knowledge of another kind. So they can't really escape being philosophical, and neither can we escape being philosophical in our daily lives. Really, we're all philosophers because we use language, and language is inherently philosophical. It does a lot of the thinking with us—if not for us—

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that philosophers would recognize as their own. That's a long-winded short answer to your question.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:18] Well, I'm thinking too, when you talk about liberal arts, I think about these terms "soft skills" and "hard skills", which we hear a lot about or read about. How would you explain the relationship between soft and hard skills and the liberal arts?

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:06:35] Good question. As I understand it, hard skills are precisely those skills that the STEM disciplines provide, that lead to very specific outcomes, that have very specific procedures and knowledge bases that they require. But they don't require you to think about relationships, causal relationships, content relationships, overlaps, integration—the kinds of things we need to think about when we're studying society—literature, the human imagination, or behavior and things like that. In our society, I think hard skills sound better in the ear. It sounds more serious and has a certain cachet that the liberal arts don't have. But a society with only hard skills could not have democracy. It would be a horror show. We need citizens who look past their immediate tools, their immediate skill sets, or their immediate jobs, who can be part of communities—political communities, economic communities, and cultural communities, as I said, where important conversations take place that spill over into the other two communities. So that's why I say that citizenship is triangular, and that's the reason why the liberal arts are so important—one of the reasons.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:03] Maybe we can just pause there for a moment because you do make this point about the role that liberal arts and critical thinking play in democracy. Citizenship shows up right there in the title of your book. And so, not to sound too callous, but maybe to play devil's advocate a little, why would learning businesses care about democracy, or why should they care about democracy? If they're really just focused on trying to make that doctor a better doctor or whatever professional better in their job, in life, what's the connection there between that and democracy?

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:08:40] It *is* the job of a dental school to make the best possible dentists, and it's the job of a street sweeper to sweep the street as well as they can. I honor all of those professions and everything in between. But, to answer your question about business, there are two answers. First, businesses as a whole need to be corporate citizens, or there's going to be political unrest. There are going to be spillovers and unwanted and unforeseen, sometimes foreseeable, consequences to their actions. Like when a freight train has an accident in Ohio, and the company is held accountable for their lax procedures. It is a social act to run a business in Ohio or anywhere else. So there's a citizenship dimension of that that can't be ignored. And

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the second answer, I think, pretty obviously, is that the individuals in that corporation aren't and don't want to be simply the cogs in a big machine. They also want to function as citizens, whether it's having a bowling night or going to the opera or going to a ballgame or attending church or volunteering or anything they do for a community, anything that involves both give and take between an individual and community, whether it's voting or voting with your dollars at the grocery store or exchanging ideas or appreciating artworks from the past and so on. It all has a citizenship dimension.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:27] As someone who listens to the Leading Learning Podcast, you should know about the Leading Learning newsletter, which you can subscribe to at leadinglearning.com/inbox. The newsletter is inbox intelligence for learning businesses and helps you understand the latest technology, marketing, and learning trends and grow your learning business. Best of all, it's a free resource. As a subscriber, you'll get Leading Links, our monthly curated collection of resources to help you grow the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business; the podcast digest, a monthly summary of podcast episodes released during the previous month; plus, periodic announcements highlighting Leading Learning Webinars and other educational opportunities designed to benefit learning business professionals. Subscribe, for free, at leadinglearning.com/inbox. And, if you're already subscribed, point a colleague to leadinglearning.com/inbox.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:26] We're living in a time when it seems like the liberal arts are under attack or, at least, under scrutiny. One example: Virginia's Marymount University is eliminating some liberal arts majors for undergraduates. So, then, I'm thinking about our listeners, who are focused on serving the adult lifelong learner. What do you see as some of the shorter- and/or longer-term implications of the denigration of the liberal arts for adult lifelong learners and those that serve them?

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:11:58] It depends on what the adult lifelong learners are looking for and why. But there should be and, as far as I know, there are a plethora of ways to become educated informally or outside of a school setting. I personally enjoy a lot of the lifelong learning classes that my college sets up for its alumni. I've taken about a dozen of them over the last 20 years with great pleasure and enjoyment. And I belong to a nonfiction book club, which has helped me considerably when the books were ones that shed light on the work I was doing—often they were the ones that I picked, but not always. There are many, many ways to be a lifelong learner, and, I think, probably the political side—in terms of the attacks on schools in Florida and elsewhere—has a more immediate impact on people who are in institutions, in schools, who were told they cannot learn about the history of race because that is falsely equated with critical

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race theory, for example, or that they can't, in their teens, talk about the important subject of gender identity because that's deemed by the far right, which controls the many school districts in rural America, to be inappropriate for children. Well, it is inappropriate for children at age 6 or 7 but not at age 12 or 14, where the consequences of these policies could be more teen suicides, frankly.

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:13:42] There's a lot of, as I said, anti-intellectualism. There are a lot of attacks on the liberal arts per se or, as you put it, soft skills. Democracies are based on soft skills, not on hard skills. They don't rely on our having more bridges and tunnels, and we may need more bridges and tunnels. But they rely on more bridges and tunnels between people's minds, not between/across rivers and so on. The other thing I'd say—and I talk about this in the book—is that liberal arts is a terrible term for a great idea. But it's evolved to the exclusion of other terms, better terms arguably (critical inquiry) because, in the ancient Latin world, it meant the skills of a free citizen, never mind that that was a male citizen and probably a wealthy male citizen, but it was the skills of a free citizen that translated as *artes liberales* and became the liberal arts and became the trivium and the quadrivium in the medieval period that evolved further in the modern period to the point where it's now pretty much all non-skill-based learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:00] One place in the book that caught my attention, you write that the "pressures on schools and students for job readiness do little or nothing to advance either personal or national prosperity, but they do a great deal of ambient damage to the culture of learning…. Treating students as 'customers' who only need to be taught immediately marketable skills is just one form of such damage." That stood out to me because, at Leading Learning, we're working with organizations whose learners are, almost by definition, customers/ They are out there deciding what they need or want to spend their time and money learning. Do you think that this danger of focusing on marketable skills extends to the adult lifelong learner? Or is it less of an issue with an adult who really might have a better handle on "Okay, this is what I need or want to know?"

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:15:55] I think it's less of an issue. I would have to think about it longer than I have time for here to give you a great answer. But my off-the-cuff answer is that most lifelong learners are more targeted and more focused on what they want to learn. They're not exploring to decide what they're going to do in their lives. So it's a different environment. And, as I said, I have no problem with people who want to take a course to become an electrician or a plumber. I, myself, have a strong interest in electricity, which I haven't pursued yet. I'm not just a nerd in the clouds. But it'll come; the time will come for me to do that. I'm more concerned not about

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the support for skill-based education but the attacks on general education and on general higher education that looks at the world in a more integrated way.

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:17:03] I don't think, for example, we will ever solve the climate crisis just through STEM learning. Even if engineers come up with ways to extract carbon from the atmosphere, which I hope they will, there are political, moral, community, and individual questions we have to decide about—for example, how to recycle our garbage and things like that or how much energy to consume—that you can't learn just in a STEM class. The facts are important to start with, but then there are contestable questions—political and moral questions—that have to be talked through in groups so that people see broader perspectives than their own, so that they come to their own perspective with more confidence and so on.

Celisa Steele: [00:18:00] I was thinking myself about the question and thinking that your view of liberal arts as being this way of really learning critical thinking, that connection there, that if the adult lifelong learner has been able to enjoy a liberal arts education and learn those critical thinking skills, then by the time they are that adult, that critical thinking could help inform their own self-directed learning. They can make better choices because they can evaluate the options and decide, "Okay, what am I going to take? What am I going to spend my time and energy on?" And sometimes say, "Okay, this is to advance my career, purely." Or sometimes say, "This is because I love this" (whatever this is), "and I want to spend some time with it." I know that you say that critical thinking is a key element of community, and the learning businesses and organizations that we work with are very interested in community, as social support is so important in learning. And so I would just love to get your thoughts on the connection that you see between critical thinking and community.

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:19:13] Sure. Critical thinking in my formulation is rationality. There's no daylight between them although some people have argued that there is, but by straining definitions. It's rationality, and rationality comes in a variety of forms, starting with formal logic and informal logic. And informal logic has six or eight or ten, depending on how you count, important subdivisions. It's all about how we are hardwired to make certain mental mistakes and what guidelines we can use to correct those mistakes or forestall them. There's that, and then there's analytic thinking, which is just seeing useful connections and useful distinctions between things we're talking about. So that's part of it.

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:20:08] Now, the community part is that critical thinking, or rationality, is thinking according to rules and reasons—that's my capsule definition. We subscribe to certain rules, we give reasons publicly when we do things or say things, and that's the heart of it. That's

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what makes it public. That's what makes it common ground on which to debate our irreconcilable differences over, say, Trump versus Biden or whatever. And that's all the common ground we have. And language is the principle common ground of that. Language has its own rules that we follow, not for any other reason but to be understood and to understand others. The more we follow it, the more we follow the rules of grammar and using words properly, et cetera, the better we understand each other. And that's the goal. That's the highest, really, that we can aspire to, I think. And so rationality is a form of community. Language is a form of community. Philosophy is a form of community. The liberal arts give us the underpinnings for those communities.

Celisa Steele: [00:21:24] When you think about the future of lifelong learning, what interests you? Are there developments or trends that you have your eye on?

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:21:35] Well, to the extent that I think about it, I'm an optimist. I'm not an optimist about human nature; it's always going to be depraved. But I'm an optimist about the sense in which our tools and technologies, which create vast problems for us, to probably a pretty significant extent, can also offset or resolve those problems, as long as we use them wisely. Lifelong learning is a relatively new phenomenon, but it clearly fills a niche and a vacuum because people want it. People like it. It doesn't have to be formal, and it doesn't have to be degree-conferring. My own experience is that it's one of the joys of my life to meet friends, whether in a classroom or on Zoom with a professor, as if I were back in college—but maybe with a little bit more respect than I got from the professor back then—and to just learn. For me, that's exciting. Other people have a more directed, more goal-oriented motivation for learning, and that's fine too. But we're obviously seeing podcasts, Zooms, and AI is going to play a role, for better or worse, in this too.

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:23:03] I'm an optimist that it will sort itself out and that lifelong learning is not going to be one of the main problems of the 20th century. It'll be one of the main solutions if anything. And I think AI is the big thing that's looming, that we need to figure out what role it plays and what limitations we need to put on it, if we can. We have a very poor record of controlling our communication technology, starting with radio, followed by television, and the Internet. In each case, they've become more and more commodified, commercial, and less and less in the public interest. Maybe that can change, maybe not. I hope it can. But lifelong learning, to me, doesn't present any unique challenges to humane goals, and I hope it continues and flourishes.

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Celisa Steele: [00:23:58] It is interesting to think about this current form of AI that has really taken off with ChatGPT, which is language-based, and, as you're pointing out, language being this realm of rationality and critical thinking. So, it is, to me, interesting to think about how that does evolve and shape how we perceive how rational it is or isn't, as it's having these hallucinations and saying things that it believes that aren't at all true.

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:24:26] We don't want to be technophobes completely or Luddites, but we certainly want to be techno-sceptics because every technology has unforeseen and unequal consequences for different people. This is a lesson we learned from Neil Postman in the 1980s and 90s in his wonderful books like *Amusing Ourselves to Death*. And I talked about it a little bit in my book *The Sound Bite Society*, which came out in 1999. But I'm not a Pollyannish person about technology per se. It's very much a double-edged sword. But I think Henry David Thoreau said something very wise about this in the 19th century, something to the effect of, "Our tools are but improved means to an unimproved end." So they are valuable, but they never ever resolve the important questions of human life, and sometimes they make them worse.

Celisa Steele: [00:25:35] You've shared a little bit about some of the things that you enjoy doing, but tell us a little bit more about how do you approach your own lifelong learning? What are some specific habits, practices, or sources for you when you're looking to continue to grow professionally or personally?

Jeffrey Scheuer: [00:25:55] I'm the kind of person who loves writing, and that means I love reading and learning. They just go together. If they're not going together, you're a hack at one or all of those things. Reading something that excites me and expands my vision of some narrow problem is what really turns me on. I do other things in life. I grow roses. I watch baseball (and far too much of it). And I used to collect rare books—I don't anymore. I ran out of both money and space to keep buying rare books, so I moved on. But books, for me, are the main thing that excites me. And they keep piling up.

Jeff Cobb: [00:26:56] Jeffrey Scheuer is a freelance writer, independent scholar, and the author of *Inside the Liberal Arts: Critical Thinking and Citizenship*. In the show notes for this episode at leadinglearning.com/episode363, you'll find a link to Jeff's site, where you can learn more about his books and thinking.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:15] Jeff and I would be grateful if you would rate the Leading Learning Podcast on Apple Podcast or wherever you listen, especially if you find the show valuable,

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because those ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:27:28] And please spread the word about Leading Learning, whether in a one-on-one conversation with a colleague or a personal note or on social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode363, you'll find links to connect with us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:27:46] Thanks for listening, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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

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