Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] We're not convinced that what adult learners really want is a credential. We'd argue that they want what that credential provides them in terms of career options or advancement or, most fundamentally, what it means when they share that credential with others.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:22] I'm Celisa Steele.

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

Celisa Steele: [00:00:31] We're calling this episode, "Digital Credentials Aren't Valuable Unless…," and you might be surprised to hear us questioning the value of digital credentials.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:41] Indeed, if you've been tuning in for a while, you should be surprised. Episode 295 of the Leading Learning Podcast was actually called "The Value of Credentials," and that included digital credentials.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:54] In today's episode, number 395—100 episodes later—we're taking the stance that digital credentials aren't valuable. At least on their own.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:05] Right, and, of course, we're being a bit clever, being sophists, but we're doing so to make an important point. Digital credentials in and of themselves are not valuable. They become valuable when they're part of an ecosystem. You can think back, for example, to the early days of the telephone. Well, you probably can't think back to that, but, at least based what you've read about it, you know that having one of those wasn't that great. The real communications breakthrough came when people you wanted to call and who you wanted to call you actually had phones too.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:41] Same thing with e-mail. I remember, in the early days of e-mail (at least my early days of e-mail), I could easily go days without checking my inbox, even as I was in

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college and was actively engaged in coursework. It was during the semester. Now that's pretty unimaginable. Even K-12 kids are checking their e-mail daily and doing important schoolwork facilitated through those e-mail communications.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:09] Yes, I'm just trying to process that whole idea of not checking my e-mail for days—something I need to do but very difficult to do. Of course, both of those analogies are about communication. I think that's apt because digital badges, different types of digital credentials, really are about communication as well. They're about a way to communicate someone's skills and experience.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:35] Yes, and, also, both analogies are about a technology hitting a tipping point, and it seems like digital credentials are at that tipping point now—or about to get there.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:48] That's right. We know that from a number of sources, and one of those is our data from the survey we did in late 2023 about areas of focus for learning businesses in 2024. We asked about new or alternative approaches to credentialing, including certificate programs, microcredentials, and digital badges. If we combine folks that are already working in those alt credentialing areas and those planning to start work there in 2024, it was 73.4 percent of respondents—or nearly three-quarters. Of course, that includes more than digital badges, but other data also supports growth.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:30] 1EdTech and Credential Engine periodically do a badge count, so that's another data source we can look to. 1EdTech, they're the stewards of the Open Badges standard—and we'll probably touch on that a little bit more here in a minute—but, if we look at some of the data from their 2022 badge count, which is their most recent, it tells a pretty dramatic story. They got information from 53 badge platforms, and, across those platforms, over half a million unique badges exist. And then, if you look at the number of badges issued to individuals, it's almost 75 million. Now that alone, I think, sounds impressive, but, if we look at their data from the badge counts done in 2020 and 2018, you can really see how steep the growth trajectory is. In the two years between 2020 and 2022, there was a 10-percent increase in the total badges available to be earned and a 73-percent increase in badges issued to individuals. If you look at the four years between 2018 and 2022, there was a 172-percent increase in total badges available to be earned and a 211-percent increase in issued badges. So lots of growth.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:54] 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,

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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: [00:05:24] Clearly, we've seen a dramatic growth in the number of badges out there—the sheer volume of badges out there—which would suggest that we're getting to critical mass. But we want to go beyond just critical mass because there's more to it than that. There really is this idea of an ecosystem, where there's this need among the people in the community, in that ecosystem, for making use of that technology, that new thing that has gained critical mass. And we know—or at least we think—it's true that ecosystems tend to work best when there are some open standards that help to set the parameters for that ecosystem.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:07] And allow different players to interact effectively. We mentioned that 1EdTech is the steward of the Open Badges standard. An open badge is a type of digital badge that conforms to this standard that they manage, and it can serve as a portable credential. It can contain metadata, and that metadata can offer detailed information about whatever the achievements are that are being credentialed. It's not a specific software, but it's a method for embedding data into the credential.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:41] It's important that that becomes a shared method, that people understand the method. The method is going to be repeatable—as you said, it's not a specific software—that can be repeated across different software platforms, different types of software. It's really that there is that common standard. There's that common method that underlies the creation and the issuance of those credentials. We were really lucky to get to collaborate with 1EdTech on a Webinar about "Adding Value to Skills-Based Credentials with Digital Standards."

Celisa Steele: [00:07:16] Western Governors University was also involved. And, in that Webinar, they provided an example of what they're doing and a demonstration of their Achievement Wallet, which they've been beta testing. Seeing that really drove home, for us, the real value of credentials, which is not in them on their own but them in an ecosystem. Now, what WGU is doing is pretty sophisticated stuff. It's still not even there 100-percent in practice for them, but it is there 100-percent in terms of conceptual value.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:51] That's right. As the learner, you can decide which digital credentials to display and to whom, and your achievements can be automatically compared to skills and experience needed for your jobs.

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Celisa Steele: [00:08:06] For your job or the job that you want to have.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:09] That's right.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:09] And so this also gets back to where we see a real sweet spot for learning businesses—this idea of aligning credentials with workforce development needs and then also providing a really clear pathway to learners. That's exactly what WGU is doing and able to show and hitting on all of those areas, and it's really powerful when you do bring them together.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:32] We've talked about that, and you'll hear us continue to talk about that, because we think that that really is, if not the biggest opportunity, certainly one of the biggest opportunities out there for learning businesses right now is to get to that sweet spot. And digital credentials—and digital credentials that are based on standards that make them part of this type of ecosystem—are a big part of that.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:52] Right. So those standards make the digital credentials not only human-readable but also machine-readable, and, when they're machine-readable, that means that you can make use of vast amounts of data. You can mine that pretty easily. And, again, we'll go to some old technologies for an example here. But it's like VHS. You suddenly have that tape that you can put into a VCR machine anywhere, and it's going to play for you. Or, in the learning world, this is like SCORM—this idea of interoperability so that you really can connect with a variety of different systems and pull in data from lots of different areas and make use of it.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:32] Yes, and, in the ecosystem, you, as a learning business, might play a bigger or a smaller role. WGU has a lot of digital credentials, and it's playing a big role—a huge role— in the world that it operates in. Your learning business could feed into some other organization's Achievement Wallet, like WGU's. Or you could decide to be the wallet for the people in your field, profession, industry.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:00] I think there's room to play at either end of that spectrum. The point is that you want to have the vision, though—whether or not you're the owner of something like the WGU Achievement Wallet, that can be debated, whether that's the role for you to play in your space or not—but to have that vision of, somehow, your digital credentials are going to be part of that larger ecosystem where it's really helping people, even beyond what your learning business can provide, but it's allowing learners to take what your learning business does

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provide and connect it to other things that they're learning other places and help them see the pathways that they need to build their skills or to switch into different roles.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:40] And I think, logically, that probably is the role that most learning businesses are going to play. If you're, for example, a trade or professional association that really is the dominant organization in a huge field or industry that you serve, then it might make sense for you to be that sort of wallet. But most organizations are going to be smaller and feeding into something else within whatever field or industry they're serving. So, again, those standards are so important. If you're thinking about digital badges, other types of digital credentials, even if you've already developed them and you haven't really paid attention to the standards so far, you're going to do yourself a favor by stepping back and getting that right from the beginning so that you really are able to be a valuable part of a larger ecosystem.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:29] So our key takeaway is, if you offer a serious credential, if you offer a certification or an assessment-based certificate, and if you aren't currently offering a digital credential to show that people have earned your credential, you need to be thinking about the timeline for transitioning to a standards-based digital credential.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:52] Of course, a serious standards-based digital credential might not be needed or even appropriate for lighter-weight, less-intensive experiences like, say, conference attendance. But where a learner is likely to want to share your credential with a current or prospective employer, and where an employer is going to get value from being able to see via the metadata what went into earning that credential and that that credential is still valid, then it's not a question of whether you should offer it as a digital credential, it's a matter of when. When not whether.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:34] Learners are rarely looking for the chance to spend four hours in a classroom, three days at a conference, or three weeks completing an online course. Much more often, they're looking for what they might be able to do differently or better after learning something in that course or at that conference.

Celisa Steele: [00:12:51] And we'll go one step further and say we're not convinced that what adult learners really want is a credential. We'd argue that they want what that credential provides them in terms of career options or advancement or, most fundamentally, what it means when they share that credential with others.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:13:12] At leadinglearning.com/episode395, you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. If you haven't yet, please do subscribe so we can get some data on the impact of the podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:25] We'd be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us wherever you listen on Apple Podcasts or whatever other platform, especially if you enjoy the show. Jeff and I personally appreciate those reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:42] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one note or conversation with a colleague, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode395, you'll find links to connect with us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:59] 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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