



## Learning *and* Education

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 397

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:00] Learning, education, and professional development are not the same. Similar, yes, interrelated even, but fundamentally and importantly different. We believe understanding learning in its broadest and deepest sense is not just an academic exercise. If we take the parochial view of learning as merely education, we limit ourselves dangerously.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:26] I'm Celisa Steele.

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:28] I'm Jeff Cobb, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:36] We thought about calling this episode "Learning Versus Education," but we thought that sounded adversarial, so we settled on "Learning *and* Education."

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:47] Yes. *Versus* suggests legal briefs and opposing parties, or even World Wrestling Entertainment-style smackdown.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:54] Yes. We don't want to do anything that brings wrestling in, given the other Jeff Cobb. Because, dear listener, if you don't know, Leading Learning's Jeff Cobb has to compete with another Jeff Cobb on the interwebs—Jeff Cobb the professional wrestler.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:10] Yes, my nemesis. So, aside from wanting to keep wrestling out of this, the point we want to make is not that learning and education are opposed or at odds, but simply they are different. And, because the difference feels important at the strategic level, we want to devote an episode to walking through the distinction.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:32] Maybe we can start by just sharing why this is top of mind for us.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:37] Yes. We had a question related to this recently from a consulting client who is trying to...well, they're reinventing their education, transforming it, and want to now figure out what to call that department that used to be education and events. I won't say what the exact title was before. But the question was, going forward, should it be education? Should it be

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professional development? Should it be learning? What terminology should be used for this new, transformed learning function within the organization?

Celisa Steele: [00:02:09] And so maybe we can just unpack some of those usual suspects when it comes to what terms tend to get used to describe this type of work. I think you just ticked off the three that are top of mind: education, professional development, and learning. I think education tends to be applied to conventional schooling, from K-12 all the way up through higher-ed degrees. We, as a society, tend to talk about things like a “high school education” or a “college education.”

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:41] That’s right. Education tends to be about taking classes, earning credentials, acquiring and proving the acquisition of knowledge and skills.

Celisa Steele: [00:02:52] Education tends to deal with activities and outcomes that are set by others, so you might have the school board or the university administration making some of those decisions about what constitutes education.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:08] Right. And the role of formal education, established knowledge, and the credentials associated with them get a lot of attention in society because formal education produces relatively clear signals that can be seen and used as social and economic capital. The college degree, for example, is a big one—that signals something to the job market that’s very important.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:30] So that’s a look at “education” as a term. Let’s talk about “professional development.” I think professional development tends to be applied to shorter but still structured learning experiences. These also tend to be focused on adult learners after they’ve completed their formal education.

Jeff Cobb: [00:03:49] Right, and professional development tends to be about preparing that adult to do a specific job or to do a job better. There’s that development aspect of it. You’re developing yourself as a professional, and so these experiences are going to help you do that.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:05] And so then that brings us to the third term, “learning.” Jeff, I know that you have put forth a definition in the past, and I think it’s a good definition for us to fall back on here, and that is that learning is the lifelong process of transforming information and experiences into knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:04:27] Yes, it's amazing how much tweaking and wordsmithing it took over time just to get to that sentence, but I think that sums it up pretty well. "Learning" is an umbrella term that encompasses education and professional development, but also much more than that.

Celisa Steele: [00:04:43] That's right because it includes informal experiences as well as those formal experiences that tend to get called "education" or called "professional development." And, because it encompasses informal experiences as well, it's a little bit fuzzier as a category.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:00] Definitely. But, really, it is everything that is impacting knowledge, skills, behaviors, and attitudes, and that's how we use that term, "learning."

Celisa Steele: [00:05:14] 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](http://tagoras.com/services).

Celisa Steele: [00:05:50] Our belief is that education can be a little bit limiting. To use that term "education" can have us think about just one part of learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:04] Yes, it can tend to keep us stuck in that "We've always done it that way" mindset, which was part of the issue there, like in renaming a department. Because, if you're trying to take things forward, you want to transform, you want to do new things in a new way, "education" comes with that baggage that it's about a certain set of activities, a certain set of rules and outcomes that you're trying to achieve. And, if you're transforming, you probably want to move beyond that.

Celisa Steele: [00:06:30] Right. Education tends to be conservative, and we're using that term "conservative" in a non-political sense, meaning it conserves, preserves, passes along the established body of knowledge or the established narrative in whatever field you're dealing with. And it tends to treat the narrative as epistemological rather than instrumental. Jeff, I'm going to leave it to you to unpack what we mean by that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:07:00] Yes, toss that hot potato to me. I think we need a bell to ring too whenever we use one of those words like that. One of my grandfathers would have called that a \$5 word. But "epistemological" is basically the basis of knowledge and learning, so education tends to

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treat the narrative that way rather than as instrumental, which is just a means to an end. And, if I dig my hole deeper and go into philosophy here, back to the times of Plato, you can think of education as about being—what is, what is established, what can be, you can get your arms around—versus becoming, which learning is very much about becoming. What’s always in process can’t actually be nailed down. Learning is instrumental. It’s a means to an end that keeps repeating itself again and again.

Celisa Steele: [00:07:52] I think another aspect of education is that it tends to forefront the teacher or the subject matter expert. And, again, because there’s this idea of the established body of knowledge, there’s, therefore, this idea of the expert, someone who really knows that body of knowledge and can then, therefore, pass that body of knowledge along to someone else.

Jeff Cobb: [00:08:12] Right. As you can already pick up from some of what we’re saying, if you’re stuck in the concept of education—as we’ve described it—that can really stymie innovation or broader thinking about what needs to be done, what needs to change, improve, and grow. Again, thinking about becoming, you really want to have that sort of direction to what you’re doing, which, again, we think “learning” encompasses better than “education” does.

Celisa Steele: [00:08:39] Even broader language like “education and events” can still be limiting because education and events tend to be about the things that you offer. They tend to be about the products, about what you do. And learning is more about the goal—it’s more about this outcome that you are seeking for your learners.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:00] Right, so we encourage listeners to embrace learning, which is a mindset for the learners and for your learning business, as the way that you think about what you’re doing, what you’re delivering. Yes, education will be a part of that, but really think more broadly. We talked about education being more conservative, and we’ve talked about learning being more about becoming. Learning is inherently progressive. It’s always in the process of happening. The person who is learning is actively changing. Learning causes change, and change causes learning.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:38] Yes, there’s this virtuous cycle where the change and the learning are driving one another. I think another difference between the education focus versus the learning focus is that I said that education tends to forefront the teacher or the subject matter expert. I think learning forefronts the learner; it’s about her own active role in her development and

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growth, and, ultimately, learning is up to the learner. We, as teachers or facilitators, we can only lead the horse to water.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:08] That's right. In all of this, too, we probably need to emphasize and then re-emphasize as we go along that there's nothing wrong with "education." There's nothing wrong with "professional development." It's not like those aren't terms that should be used, but it is simply important to recognize them as a smaller slice of this overall learning pie that we're talking about.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:28] Just as a small side note, we'll have to see on this front, but I think that generative AI may further increase the importance of learning as opposed to, say, education or professional development alone because, as AI can readily tap into the established body of knowledge in any given field and support an individual in that kind of domain expertise, then it's really going to be the individual's ability to learn, to think critically, to ask good questions, to weigh choices, that's going to become that much more important.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:01] Yes, you can even envision the structure that comes right now with education. Professional development tends to be put into structuring courses or classes—these defined, little bodies of knowledge and experience that a learner goes through in a point in time. But, when you think about how people really tend to learn, if they're given the opportunity to do it, it is asking questions, applying, asking other questions, applying, adjusting. You think about your use of Google to solve a problem. When people are able to do that, they're really learning in a way that supports them in the work they're doing. We're talking mainly about professional usage of learning here.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:47] If you think about what a ChatGPT-type experience does, if somebody can engage with that type of experience and be able to ask about what it is they're trying to find out, what it is they're trying to know, get a response, and then be able to continue a dialog, for me, that's a better learning experience than a course or a class tends to be, particularly if you're talking about online learning. You can see a world where that sort of education mindset is more applied to doing things like creating custom GPTs, a body of knowledge around a particular skill set or professional need within which the learner can then explore as a learner, and the experiences are driven by the learner within that.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:33] I think we can see something like custom GPTs, and maybe it takes some other form. That's the term for these sorts of GPT experiences right now. You could see something like that replacing the traditional education course experience in the future.

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Celisa Steele: [00:12:57] We chose the term “learning business” to talk about the audience that we serve because we really do want to help organizations focus on learning broadly—that full pie, beyond the education and professional development pieces. We want to help them think broadly about how they can support learners in their learning.

Jeff Cobb: [00:13:19] Now, that said, anybody who listens to us or follows our work in general will notice that we often talk about working with organizations in the business of continuing education, professional development, and lifelong learning. We list the three together, and that’s mostly because we want people to understand what it is we’re talking about. People do identify with those terms, “continuing education” and “professional development,” but we want to make sure that the word “learning” is in there as well.

Celisa Steele: [00:13:49] I think that ties to what you ultimately recommended to that client about the new departmental name. You suggested perhaps “Learning and Professional Development” might be appropriate. So there’s that familiar term of “professional development,” there’s that commitment to serving the profession, but then there’s also that broadness in “learning,” that you really are interested not only in the received knowledge that already exists now, but you want to be part of the learning that goes into continuing that profession going forward.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:19] Right. Hopefully, that represented the best of both worlds, or the best of all worlds, I guess.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:25] We bring all of this up because, to us, language matters. And, if we go back and count, I don’t know exactly how many we would come up with, but I think we would come up with a lot of episodes where we’ve spent time defining key terms. It’s important to us to be clear about key terms, and that’s not only because we were educated in literature, but we really do believe fundamentally that words matter. Words are how we convey ideas, and, if we limit our words or if we use them inaccurately, we limit what we can achieve.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:01] So we encourage you to be careful with your language, not to use the words “learning” and “education” interchangeably. Instead, use each in its proper place.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:12] I think we need to appreciate much more deeply, as part of this using the terms correctly and properly, the degree to which learning and life really are interwoven. Learning is not confined to the walls of a classroom or the structure of a course. Learning really

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does happen in the flow of life. It's rooted in physicality, it's rooted in emotion, and it's rooted in those things as much as in cognition.

Jeff Cobb: [00:15:43] And, when we shift to seeing learning in this way, it becomes much easier to recognize and take advantage of the myriad opportunities for learning that we encounter daily—and to help those we serve see and seize those opportunities as well.

Celisa Steele: [00:15:59] Yes, sure, some of those opportunities will, of course, arise in the context of education or in the context of professional development, but the vast majority will not because education and learning are not the same thing.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:22] Learning, education, and professional development are not the same. Similar, yes, interrelated even, but fundamentally and importantly different. We believe understanding learning in its broadest and deepest sense is not just an academic exercise. If we take the parochial view of learning as merely education, we limit ourselves dangerously.

Celisa Steele: [00:16:44] At [leadinglearning.com/episode397](https://leadinglearning.com/episode397), you'll find show notes, a transcript, and other options for subscribing to the podcast.

Jeff Cobb: [00:16:53] We'd be grateful if you would take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you listen, especially if you enjoy the show. Celisa and I personally appreciate reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when people search for content on leading a learning business.

Celisa Steele: [00:17:09] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one note or one-on-one conversation with a colleague, or you can use social media. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode397](https://leadinglearning.com/episode397), you'll find links to connect with us on X, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb: [00:17:25] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

*[music for this episode by DanoSongs, [www.danosongs.com](http://www.danosongs.com)]*

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