



## Engagement Is Everything

### Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 416

Celisa Steele: [00:00:00] If you're looking to improve the reach, revenue, and impact of your learning business, focus on engagement, not content. Content is no longer king. Engagement is everything.

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.

Celisa Steele: [00:00:26] Jeff, do you remember that idea of content being king?

Jeff Cobb: [00:00:31] Yes. Content is king. A lot of people don't know this, but that usually gets attributed to Bill Gates. He used that phrase in an essay titled, appropriately enough, "Content Is King," and that was published way back in ye olde days of 1996 on the Microsoft Web site—ancient history. But Gates emphasized the importance of content on the Internet and predicted content would be the key driver of revenue and success for businesses in the digital age, and, to a certain extent, he was right.

Celisa Steele: [00:01:06] But then along came a new regent, someone to assume the throne. We started hearing context is king.

Jeff Cobb: [00:01:14] Yes. That was very popular on the marketing speaker circuit for a while, just to be contrarian and offer an alternative once everybody was reciting that mantra that content is king. That phrase has been attributed to a lot of different sources over time, but one of probably the most notable early mentions comes from Gary Vaynerchuk, who's an entrepreneur, social media expert, and all-around highly visible guy when it comes to both content and context. He emphasized the importance of context in digital marketing and social media, and that was back around 2012. We're definitely dealing in old stuff here around content is king, context is king. Vaynerchuk frequently discussed how delivering the right message in the right context is crucial for effective communication and engagement in the digital age.

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Celisa Steele: [00:02:09] Yes, and I would argue that it seems like neither context nor content is king today. Instead, engagement is everything.

Jeff Cobb: [00:02:20] I think that is true. You certainly hear a lot of buzz, a lot of wringing of hands and gnashing of teeth out there around engagement. Everybody's looking for engagement. I don't think that means that suddenly content has no importance. It doesn't mean that context has no importance. And, by the way, the context thing is, in a way, spun out into this focus on experience. Everything's about the experience now, which I think is not fully getting at the true meaning of context because it comes up with things like, "We're going to put people in an escape room" or something like that to make it exciting and dynamic, which I don't think is what Vaynerchuk really had in mind when he was talking about context.

Celisa Steele: [00:03:00] Let's talk a little bit about why we think content is no longer king if it ever was, and why context is no longer king if it ever was. On the content side. I've heard you mention before, Jeff—and this is not necessarily your original idea—but you were saying what others are seeing, which is that the value of content is moving to zero. Maybe back when Bill Gates published his post on the Microsoft Web site around "Content Is King," at that point, back in 1996, it was a little harder to find the right content, but it's getting so easy now to create content, to publish content, to then find that content that others have created and published. And so we're awash in this sea of content. This is all the noise that we talk about. People are overwhelmed by the content, and they're looking for that signal in that sea of noise, and so content in and of itself is not as inherently valuable as it once was.

Jeff Cobb: [00:04:08] Yes, definitely, as you say, not a thought that's in any way original to me. You hear this more and more. It's just something I like to say a lot, particularly in the right context to talk about content. It's not that content has no value. Certainly, you still have to have the right content, the right stuff to get to. But its market value, its monetary value, is rapidly going to zero—already is zero in many instances. We're not talking about just blog posts and social media. We're talking about things like courses that people want to be able to charge for and are having a very hard time charging for. And, really, it's Economics 101, which, for anybody who didn't go through Economics 101, it's the whole supply-demand, and, when you have an oversupply of something, it impacts the demand. People may still want it, but they're willing to pay less and less and less for it when there's that glut of supply out there.

Celisa Steele: [00:05:02] And then, just in the last year plus, not quite two years, we've had, on top of what was already increasing ease to create, publish, and find, now we have generative AI come along making it that much easier to create and also to find content because you can use

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ChatGPT essentially like a search engine to help you find content that is going to speak to whatever your need is in the moment.

Jeff Cobb: [00:05:32] Yes, there're two sides to that. If you're a writer these days, if you're somebody who's made your living, particularly by doing marketing-oriented writing, it's getting tougher and tougher. We engage writers who are telling us that they're feeling this, that they're seeing demand for their services go down because AI can create, in the right hands, reasonably good quality content that people can't necessarily distinguish from a human, and, increasingly, the search engines can't either, in spite of whatever Google or anybody else might say. That's one side of it. The other side is the curation side of it, which often is a role for learning businesses, for thought leaders, for all sorts of people who make their living in being able to help people find the right information and to provide context. And, as AI gets better and better at doing that, it's becoming a great curator. It's starting to understand context better. So you have this incredible automation of both content and context.

Jeff Cobb: [00:06:38] At Tagoras, we partner with professional and trade associations, continuing education units, training firms, and other learning businesses to help them understand market realities and potential, to connect better with existing customers and find new ones, and to make smart investment decisions around product development and portfolio management. Drawing on our expertise in lifelong learning, market assessment, and strategy formulation, we can help you achieve greater reach, revenue, and impact. Learn more at [tagoras.com/more](https://tagoras.com/more).

Celisa Steele: [00:07:14] We've just been talking about why we don't think content is king any longer, and we touched on, at the beginning, this idea of that shift to context. Jeff, you made the comment that sometimes context and experience get tied up together, but we also don't think that context is king anymore or experience is per se. Again, as with content, you still have to have it. You still want to have a good experience. You still want to have that right context for the content, but that in and of itself also isn't sufficient. Sometimes the emphasis on experience almost gets changed because that word can mean different things. Sometimes what ends up happening with experience is it's the ice sculptures, the rock and roll band, and the lovely passed hors d'oeuvres rather than the experience tied to the learning and the importance of making use of whatever time you have together, whether that's online or in person or synchronous or asynchronously. What is that experience that enfolds the content? That's more important to our mind than the escape rooms, the ice sculptures. More fun, yes, but not necessarily contributing to learning per se.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:08:34] Right. When it comes down to it, they're made for great catch phrases. But content was never really king. Context was never really king. These were means to an end. You want good, compelling content out there. You want to understand context well because you want to engage people ultimately. In a way, engagement has always been king. Or maybe engagement isn't really king, but we're at least at a high....

Celisa Steele: [00:08:59] Engagement is everything.

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:00] Engagement is everything.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:00] We're getting rid of this idea of the regent....

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:02] Engagement is everything.

Celisa Steele: [00:09:04] Engagement is everything, and we should talk about what we mean by engagement. We'll share a definition that we like to use. It's a slightly modified version of a definition from the Glossary of Education Reform. That glossary focuses more on K-12 education. They talk about things like *student* rather than *learner*, but, in essence, it's their definition with just these minor modifications. They say that learner engagement is "the degree of attention, curiosity, interest, optimism, and passion that learners show when they are learning or being taught, which extends to the level of motivation that they have to learn and progress in their education."

Jeff Cobb: [00:09:44] Right. We've talked about this definition before in Webinars and sessions that we've given. We like it because it recognizes that there are three dimensions of engagement. First of all, cognitive engagement—that's evidenced by the use of words like *attention*, *curiosity*, and *interest* in that definition.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:06] And then there's also emotional engagement—you hear that in the words *optimism* and *passion* in that definition.

Jeff Cobb: [00:10:14] And then behavioral engagement, which gets encapsulated in that key verb *show*—that it's visible. You can see that engagement is happening.

Celisa Steele: [00:10:23] We really like that definition because it pulls together the cognitive engagement, the emotional engagement, and the behavioral engagement, all of which are really important if you want to have a highly effective learning offering for the market that you serve.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:10:40] You can probably gather, even from that definition, that engagement does involve content, it does involve context and/or experience (however you want to parse those), but it's better than, and it's more than either one of those alone. In fact, it's even probably greater than the sum of the parts.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:01] Engagement speaks to value, and we're big on value here at Leading Learning. If you're optimistic and passionate about something, that's because you value that thing. You're going to direct your attention, your interest, and your curiosity towards things that you value. If you have engagement, it already speaks to value, and you're providing something that the learners value.

Jeff Cobb: [00:11:28] Engagement also gets at uniqueness, or at least distinctiveness. Your attention and interest are directed towards things that at least you feel are unique, or at least less than the run-of-the-mill, usual things that you encounter. They're worth paying some attention to, and they're worth your interest because they do stand out from the ordinary.

Celisa Steele: [00:11:52] Importantly, that definition that we offered of engagement covers action—engaged learners *do* something. They show their engagement. They sign up for courses, they show up for courses, they actively participate, and they apply what they're learning. You have that emotional, the cognitive, and the behavioral engagement, and that's why we're saying engagement is everything because, if you have all of that, this is the recipe for highly successful, highly impactful learning offerings.

Jeff Cobb: [00:12:27] I think we are in a time now—and, again, you mentioned AI earlier, Celisa—where there's a lot of worry about what content to produce, how to produce that content fast enough, how to repurpose that content. And, certainly, learning businesses do need to focus on that. Again, it's not that content has no value. We're just saying that the market value is getting increasingly questionable. Of course, learning businesses are also, in our experience...or I've talked to a lot of professionals who are very worried about the contextual side of it. What is the right type of experience? How do they engage learners in the right way at the right time? Again, we do have to look at that. But, in terms of where we're trying to get with all of this, it's to engage our learners because, if we're not engaging them, we're not going to get them there in the first place, we're not going to keep them there, we're not going to get them to come back, and then of course, because of that, we ultimately are not going to achieve the learning aims and the impact that we aim to achieve with everything we do as learning business professionals.

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Jeff Cobb: [00:13:52] At [leadinglearning.com/episode416](http://leadinglearning.com/episode416), you'll find show notes, a transcript, and options for subscribing to the podcast. If you haven't yet, please do take a minute to subscribe.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:03] 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. Jeff and I personally appreciate those reviews and ratings, and they help the podcast show up when others search for content on leading a learning business.

Jeff Cobb: [00:14:19] And please spread the word about Leading Learning. You can do that in a one-on-one exchange with a colleague, or you can do it through social media. In the show notes at [leadinglearning.com/episode416](http://leadinglearning.com/episode416), you'll find a link to connect with us on LinkedIn.

Celisa Steele: [00:14:32] Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

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