

The eLearning Coach Podcast #19

Shifting to Learning Environments with Catherine Lombardozzi

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Connie: Hello learning people, welcome to episode 19 of theelearningcoach podcast. In this session, we explore options for creating learning experiences that can be more appropriate and perhaps richer than just courses. I interview Catherine Lombardozzi who has created a framework for designing learning environments. Catherine is founder of Learning 4 Learning Professionals and author of the forthcoming book Learning Environments by Design. In her consulting work, Catherine focuses on the professional development of designers, facilitators, learning consultants, learning leaders, and faculty, and she invites people who are looking to create comprehensive learning and development strategies in many different contexts. Here is the interview.

Connie: Hi Catherine, welcome to theelearningcoach podcast.

Catherine: Hello Connie, thanks for inviting me, I really appreciate it.

Connie: You have written an e-book that I was very interested in and I think the audience will be too, it is called Learning Environments by Design: Enabling Learning in the Workplace. Can you give me some context as to why you wrote the book?

Catherine: Sure. A number of years ago, I started to notice a lot of people saying that instructional design is dead and that kind of worried me because it is what I do for a living, it is also what I teach as an instructor, and so I have to be worried if in fact instructional design is disappearing, and I wanted to just reject that message completely, but in the end, what I started to think was these are people that I really respect who are saying these things and perhaps I should take a step back and try to understand where they are coming from. When I thought about it more and more at that time, what I concluded was not that instructional design is dead but that instruction as a way of supporting learning is becoming less prominent in our field, that when we think about supporting learning, we have to think about it beyond instruction. There are lots of other ways that people learn, and as learning professionals, we have to address our learning needs using a much broader palette of techniques and activities and resources

and those kinds of things. When I started down that path, I needed some tools for myself to help me think about how to even start talking about that with people to help me think about what that might look like, so I came up with this learning environment design framework that I found to be really, really useful for my own consulting and in the work that I was doing, and as I started sharing it with people at conferences and in one-on-one meetings and what not, people really liked the model and so the book was written to be a way to communicate the framework to other people in a much more detailed way.

Connie: I think it is so great that you have this awareness of what is going on in the field and at the same time you can influence students who are studying this in school. In the book, you talk about a learning environment and also people in the industry are talking about a learning ecosystem. Can you define learning environment and then how it compares to a learning ecosystem?

Catherine: Sure. Last March, the e-learning Guild had a conference called Learning Ecosystems which really drew my attention and drew me down to Florida to have a listen to what people were talking about because obviously, I have been talking about learning environments for a long time, so I wanted to see what this learning ecosystem thing was all about.

What I found out was that we actually do not know what learning ecosystems are, there is not a common definition, but among the leaders in the industry that were talking about what they were doing in their organizations and how they were starting to think about it, what came out of the discussions, which was wonderful, was a definition of an ecosystem which include the people, the processes, the technologies, and the content that come together to support learning and performance in the workplace, that was generally how they defined a learning ecosystem. When they were talking about that, it was writ large, it was about the big stuff, everything in your organization, about all of your systems, about all of the processes, and that sort of thing, so it was a fairly high level broad concept, which I really liked, but what I talk about is a learning environment. A learning environment is simply a set of curated resources and activities for learning related to a specific learning need.

So when we work with clients or with learners and we have identified a particular skill set or knowledge base that we want to help people to develop, the way that we have

traditionally approached that is by delivering training programs related to those concepts and skills, right? But what we are doing now is curating from the internet, from the library, and bookstore, and from lots of other resources among people that we know we are curating the set of resources that people can tap into when they need something and learn through their own self-directed kinds of efforts.

So a learning environment is sort of a little piece of a learning ecosystem, and of course the other day, what I said is if you think about ecosystems, one of the reasons we like this metaphor is biological ecosystems have these things attached to them that define an ecosystem, it means that everything in the system is dependent on one another and it is a very natural kind of evolving thing and that if parts of the system break down, it has impact across all of the system, and all of those things are true about learning ecosystems. That is why we like that terminology, but we can think of ecosystems as, the planet Earth, that is a huge ecosystem right, or a swampland. Or you can think of an ecosystem as being your fish tank in your living room--that is a little ecosystem.

For me, the learning environment is sort of at the level of the fish tank in the living room. The ecosystem for learning these days involves hundreds of technologies or possible technologies of which a subset might be available to you in your organization, but it involves a lot of possibilities in terms of content. If you have access to the Internet, there are just innumerable things that you might access to learn on any given subject matter. So in that turn, the ecosystem is too big and what our job is, in learning environment design, is to narrow down that set to at least a starter set of things that you think are most useful for a particular learning need. S

o when you are talking with a group of learners, you need to learn how to be better consultants, for example, and you know exactly what their context is, what they are trying to achieve as a business or as an organization, where they stand in terms of their broad skill sets, what is useful for their work, then you can start to narrow down a Google search for them. You can say “look, here are the best resources I found given our context and given our,” and I should not say I found because you should probably do this as a group, “that we found given what our needs are, so that you are sort of narrowing it down to something that is much more manageable for people to access when they need to learn something.

Connie: That makes sense, but are you saying then that in your definition of learning environment, the learning is always self-directed in the sense that it would never be part of a class?

Catherine: In my way of thinking, formal learning could be part of the learning environment. So when I am looking at supporting, going back to the consulting skills example, I might offer a class or I might point out classes that are available through vendor organizations or other places. So I might point out some formal learning, but I would also point out other things that would help people to learn while they are trying to develop that skill set over time.

Connie: Why do you think that this type of ecosystem paradigm and also the need for understanding learning environments is becoming so important now, what has changed, why are things changing?

Catherine: Well, if you look at the work that is being done by John Seely Brown and John Hagel and others, they are defining sort of a new culture both for work and for learning, and in this new culture, things are changing so fast that it is hard to turn that around to something formal to deliver back out again. By the time you do that, the world has changed, and even in colleges and universities, they are saying by the time you get through 4 years of schooling, what you have learned in your freshman year may well be outdated because things are changing that fast. So when things are changing fast, when the environment is such that we are constantly inventing our knowledge or tweaking our knowledge and tweaking our practices, it is hard to turn that around into formal learning quickly and so that is why this idea that we need to have access to resources outside of a formal event has come to the forefront, I think. It is all about the speed, it is about inventing knowledge and allowing people to be a part of that and recognizing that kind of work as learning as well, I think those 2 things really are what are driving the recognition of this.

Connie: Also one thing that comes to mind in addition to all of that, which was so well said, is the way everyone has their own devices. It is just amazing how much technology has influenced this, so that if you need to know something, you do not wait for a course, you just look it up.

Catherine: Right, yeah, it makes things so available, it makes more available than just information. That was the first like web 1.0 was information, you could go out on the Internet and find articles and webpages and just all kinds of information. Web 2.0, the promise of that was now we can talk to one another. So it is not just about going out to the Internet and finding information, it is going out on the Internet and finding people that are talking about and worrying about the same things that you are worried about that are not part of your sphere. I have had Twitter conversations and blog conversations with people I will never meet, because they are on the other side of the world, and we met one another because we are both wrestling with the same kinds of issues and we happened to be talking out loud on the Internet, and as a result, we have an opportunity to exchange ideas with one another and that is really exciting as well. So especially when our practices and our knowledge base is constantly evolving, these kinds of live, real-time conversations are great. We no longer have to wait years for something to be published in a book of some kind, we can be a part of how that thing evolved as it is evolving and that is so exciting.

Connie: This is why each person needs to have their own personal learning network, because these conversations really push our knowledge forward.

Catherine: Absolutely agree

Connie: In your book, you talk about 4 types of learning environments; can you briefly talk about each type?

Catherine: Sure. These are not hard and fast rules; these were just ways that I came up with describing it because I think people have a hard time getting their head around what exactly a learning environment might be. So the first kind of learning environment I talk about is something called is a blended learning hub. We have been doing this for a long time where you have a formal course and what you want to do is make available to those learners additional articles and resources, may be a space where the learners to talk with one another after the course is over officially. So that is sort of blending, it is a way of blending the learning from a formal event into these other areas of learning both before and after that formal event.

The second type of learning environment I call a knowledge exchange. Again, this is something we have been doing for a long time. It is figuring out how you make space for

people to share with one another what they already know and the knowledge that they have already developed. So the knowledge management from the 1990s forward has been talking about the best ways to do that and that is a learning environment to make that sort of thing available.

The third kind of learning environment is what I call learning resource portal, which is when you have a topic area or a skill area that you are trying to develop and you make available in a portal through some sort of electronic means usually, you make available in a portal all the resources, not all, but an array of resources that people can tap into to learn. So there might be portal, for example, on consulting skills or a portal on project management or a portal on doing TED talks, whatever it is your topic is, you could conceivably pull together links to all kinds of resources that can help people to learn and point out the best things that people might use to advance their knowledge or skill in that area, that is the third type.

The fourth type is what I call a collaboratory, I am not the first person to use that term, there are folks out there who are using that term, but the collaboratory implies we are inventing this knowledge as we go along. So it is a very active portal, and I use the word portal loosely, it is very active type of learning environment and a lot of it is face-to-face, working side-by-side together to figure this out. As it is not always done online, most of the times, collaboratories are putting records of things that they are doing online but a lot of their work is actually live engagement with the problems of the day, whatever those might be, and as they are working through those problems, they are thinking about “now, let us decide what we have learnt from this and what we want to take forward into our next engagement or what we are going to build on as we continue to build our knowledge base in this area.”

So those are the four kinds of learning environments that I laid out, but the lines between them are very blurry and there are elements of each probably in the other ones, but I think it just helped people, as I have talked about this; it has helped people to get their heads around what this might look like.

Connie: I think it is very helpful because when you do not have examples, you are just not sure really where it is going, and those are very clear examples. So let us say we have a learning professional and this person wants to start to try to think in terms of a learning environment, there is a particular need, they have a target audience, what

process would they use to assess the most effective learning environment for that audience?

Catherine: You assess a learning environment the same way that you assess other kinds of learning needs. You conduct a needs assessment. You ask a lot of questions first of all about the business need and performance needs and what it is that people are trying to do, that you are trying to support, and you evaluate what the learning need is, and you gather all the same kinds of information that you need to gather to make any kind of learning recommendation.

But what makes you decide that a learning environment might be an appropriate solution or part of an appropriate solution would be that you have highly motivated learners who are capable of setting their own goals; they are probably all over the planet in terms of exactly what they needed any given time. So it would be hard to put a class together because they have very varying kinds of needs. If you have emerging knowledge and practices, things that are being invented every day, so you do not want to stop and try to put a stick in the ground and say this is how we are going to do it from now until the end of time, if you do not want to do that, a learning environment can be really important as well. So those are the things that really kind of shift you into thinking maybe a learning environment could be useful, this is a knowledge base or skill set that is complex, that is emerging, and that we want to be a little bit more flexible in terms of how we address the learning need.

Connie: When you mentioned intrinsic motivation, it made me wonder, because I have a hunch that this is true but I do not know if I have ever seen any research on it, and I am wondering if you have seen anything like this where by giving people the freedom to learn in the way that they want and the subjects and the topics that they need for their everyday work life, if that somehow begins to instill intrinsic motivation in them. Have you seen any kind of examples of that?

Catherine: I am not sure that it instills intrinsic motivation as much as it draws from it or requires it. I think that is one of our big challenges with this sort of an approach is you have to assume a motivated learner. If your learners are not of the type who would go out and look for resources and would figure out ways to learn through them, then giving them this lovely set of resources is not going to be very useful because they will never go there. I use the example of compliance training, in a user learning environment

usually for compliance training, because nobody likes compliance training. They have to do that and to some degree, you have to make sure that very specific learning goals are met in compliance training. So you cannot leave that to chance, you cannot let the learner sort of guide their own path. There is some regulatory agency that has dictated what needs to be known and that has to be taught, right? In management training, where the skills are varied and people come at it from all different angles and there are lots of different context, then you have a manager who really wants to be effective, who is really seeking to make sure they are able to achieve their goals, they are more likely to say “Ghosh, I really need to get better at this, let me go look for some resources that can inform how I do this part of my job.” They are going to be more motivated to go ahead and do that.

Connie: Well, is there any research or is it too soon to find out that supports the design of learning environments?

Catherine: I have not seen much that is specifically about a learning environment the way I talk about it, but I have seen and what I draw from, actually just from the very beginning of conceptualizing this is I use the theory and research that we have in our field to sort of inform what this even looks like. So what I just talked about in terms of you have to have a motivated learner, I talk in the book about a lot of what I call the self-directed learning pillars that have to be in place. Well, those came from the research on self-directed learning. I did not make those up out of my head, I went and looked at all of the research that has been done over many years on self-directed learning and what that requires and how that happens, and from that research, I pulled out those what I call the seven pillars of self-directed learning. Then, in terms of the other facets of a learning environment, we talk about having resources for learning well, in terms of what makes that effective, again I am drawing from research that says these kind of things tend to be more usable to people or more accessible to people, so the recommendations that I make with regard to those things comes out of that research.

Connie: Okay, excellent. I know in your book, you talk about a landscaping metaphor. Can you discuss that a little bit?

Catherine: Sure, I like the landscaping metaphor for the same reason that those folks at the conference like the ecosystem. This is a living, breathing thing, right? I did not want to say it is an ADDIE model. Initially I did. Initially, I said “you know what, it is an

ADDIE model” Everything is an ADDIE for anybody who does not know it, analysis, design, development, implementation, and evaluation, as the process for creating something. So I did not want to use an ADDIE model, I wanted something that hinted at the fact that things are more emergent, more ongoing, that they feed on one another in a way that is hard to describe in a linear fashion. So I named 5 processes for designing learning environments, and those are envisioning and then finding resources and activities that would be useful; curating them, that is really not only making some judgment about which would be the most useful to your particular learners but also some other things that are related to curating that I talk about in the book; assembling a learning environment; how you make it available to your learners; and then cultivating a learning environment, which is how you keep that going over time. The landscaping metaphor really draws from this idea that if you have a garden, you have a whole biology book worth of plants that you can choose from, but you choose very specific plants for the needs of your garden. What you are trying to achieve is aesthetically what will work in your planting environment, where your in the country or in the world that sort of thing, s that works and then this idea that once you plant the thing, you cannot just let it go, you have to keep watering it and keep pruning things out that do not quite work, and putting new plants in, and you think about adding things to just make it even better and more pleasing to whoever you are trying to design that for. So as a metaphor, that works for me.

Connie: Yeah, it does work, yeah.

Catherine: It is fairly organic kind of a metaphor, and even the way I draw the process for creating a learning environment, I call it a daisy, because it looks likely a daisy, it has little petals, but it is really meant to say, this is very iterative process and each of these things, this enabling and the finding and the curating, all of these things happen kind of simultaneously and not one after one another, they just keep impacting one another as you go through the process, and if you really study people doing it ADDIE model, that does the same thing or we can talk about it that way. So this metaphor just really help me to communicate some of the important things about how a learning environment has to be designed and maintained over time.

Connie: So you are saying that the components of it are interdependent and each on impacts another?

Catherine: Absolutely, so when you are envisioning what your learning environment is going to be, you start to think about how you are going to assemble it, what it is going to look like in the end. When you are cultivating your learning environment, which means you have something that is established already and you are playing with it, now you go back and do some more finding and curating because you are missing something or you want to replace something that has become outdated. So they all have in it the same time, every time you start to go down one set of processes, you wind up looping into another set of processes in order to inform it. So I think that is just the truth of the matter and I think we try to oversimplify things too much and you lose the depth of what you are really doing.

Connie: I think that is the truth of the matter and I think that is one of the big complaints about any of these systematic approaches is that it does not take into account how iterative it is. They kind of do, but the processes are more like spaghetti than people admit.

Catherine: You are right

Connie: Let us just take someone who is a learning professional, and then want to start to get into this approach because it just seems timely, it just seems relevant. What can people do to prepare themselves to be able to design learning environments?

Catherine: I think the most important thing you can do is work on your own personal learning environment. I think it is really hard to start to envision this for somebody else if you do not know what it really means. So I think if you work on your own personal learning environment, you start to use various tools that we have in play and you start to work on your network of people that help you to learn and you start tagging things that are resources for you that continue to help you to learn, and that really helps to put you in a position to understand what you are enabling and to influence other people to see this as a viable solution for a learning need because it is much more nebulous than people are used to. People are used to writing very strict learning objectives and making people be in a room for 3 hours or 10 hours or whatever it might be, and this is very loose, and they do not have control over it, and so that does not feel good, and unless you can articulate why this is important and how this works, you are going to run into problems. So I think that is one thing to do, work on your own personal learning environment and really notice how that works for you. We all have one by the way. It is

not like you have to sit down and draw it from scratch. If you sit down for 5 minutes, you will realize what your learning environment currently is. So when I say work on your learning environment, I mean start to notice it and start to deliberately build on it in ways that support your own learning and that way, you will be able to see what this looks like when you try to design for other people.

One other thing that I think is really important as learning professionals working on this; we have to understand adult learning. We really like models that tell you exactly what to do, just sort of block copy it and you are done. You do not have to worry about how it works inside. In a learning environment, you really have to understand how it works inside in order to enable it. I often have people ask me questions, should I do this and should I do that, and it is always “it depends.” Because if you think about it, how adults learn in that particular way, like through people for example, if you think about that, here are some of the things that need to be in play and that is what you have to ask yourself, and if those things are not in play, now you have to draw from your bag of tricks to try to get the prerequisites in place, so that the environment will work the way it is supposed to. So I think it is very easy to think of a learning environment as simply a list of assets. We are just going to throw together a list of resources and a list of people to follow and a list of courseware that we can pull into play and then we are going to rely on people's experience of learning, and we just going to set people free in that. If you do not understand how those things actually work, you do not know how to fix it when it does not work for your particular learners or you do not recognize that certain prerequisites are not in play for your learners which makes doing this not necessarily going to work the way you think it is going to work. That is the other piece that I think people really have to get their heads around and most people do not want to hear that, but I will say it anyway.

Connie: It does not seem easy, it seems like a lot of fun, that is for sure, to design one, and I can see how you really do have to understand the learners, what prerequisites they might need, and you are going to have people at all different levels. So it really is a big challenge but it seems like a fun challenge.

Catherine: I agree, I really enjoy it, and I think it is very powerful. What happened in the dawn of social media, and we see this a lot, at least, I see it a lot in my Twitter feed and blogs and stuff, people say “we do not need to do courses anymore; we have the Internet, is not this cool?” Well, have you ever done a Google search when you really

wanted to know something, it does not always result in exactly what you are looking for, right? It is frustrating, it is hard, it takes time, and what people think is, we can just let the learners have at it with whatever is available, and what I am saying is I think we can do better than that. I think that we do not have to abandon the learners to a Google search. We can instead say “look, if you need to learn about this skill, here are some of the best resources we know, and pick and choose among these best resources instead of picking and choosing from among everything that could potentially come up in an Internet search.” So that is the contribution that I think learning and development professionals can make to this new way of learning.

Connie: You know, I have a podcast on curation, I cannot remember what number it is, and Robin Good mentions all the things that you can do as a curator and it really ties in well with this, the way you can annotate it and let people know Lynda.com course would be good for this and this book would be good for this, that kind of stuff. So before we wrap up, I just wanted to ask you if you had thoughts about the future for learning professionals and how it is going to change over the next decade? I promise not to hold you to it if it does not work out that way.

Catherine: Well, that is good because I do not see myself as a prognosticator. I am teaching a course now where I pointed out to my students all of the places where you can look in our industry for people who do make predictions and tell us what the trends are that we should be paying attention to, and I rely heavily on those things. But what I would say is that one, I think we are now always going to need to be continuously assessing the new tools for their affordances for learning. So you do not want to jump on every shiny thing that comes along, that would not be smart, but I think we have to look at everything that comes along and ask whether it has specific advantages for the kinds of learning that our learners, the people that we are serving or the people that we care about, that our learners need, does it have something that we can really leverage in a positive way to support their learning. So we have to get good at leveraging those tools, analyzing them, figuring out what is going to work, and helping people through a transition to using these kinds of tool if we think it has real advantages for them.

The other thing I think in the next 10 years, after that it may be less of a problem, but I think we have overestimated people’s ability to learn independently through the Internet. We just think that all this stuff is available and that they will be able to read the book that we say is the best book in the world and they will be able to take that reading and then

apply it to what they want to do and they will be fine. We expect that people can learn that way, and they can and many people are very good at it, but there are a lot of people who are not. That is why they are still asking for classes because they have not figured out how to learn effectively in other ways, and I think in the next 10 years, we are still going to be working with a lot of people who have gone through very traditional educational processes who are used to being told and learning by taking notes and learning by taking tests and learning by very traditional means, and they are not confident about their ability to learn through these other means, and I think we need to support their learning to learn, if that makes sense, and I think that is going to be an issue for the next 5 or 10 years until we get to a point where students who are very young now tend to be being taught using these tools. So they are learning how to learn in many places, not in every place, but in many places, they are learning how to learn better or differently even as they are coming up through schools, traditional schooling, so that is the other thing that I think is coming in the next 10 years.

Connie: Great, really good prognostication. Anyway, I wanted to thank you so much, this was very fascinating and thanks for giving us your time.

Catherine: Thank you for asking me.

Connie: I hope you enjoyed the interview. The learning environment model gives us more options and is a good way to think about supporting on demand content that is needed quickly or content that changes quickly. You can find the show notes with the resource links at the theelearningcoach.com/podcasts/19, and please share your thoughts on learning environments in the comments section there. I would love to hear from you. By the way, thanks to everyone who has rated the podcast in iTunes. If you have not rated it yet, please do so. Talk to you next time. Take care.