

The eLearning Coach Podcast #20
ELC 020: How To Avoid Clicky-Clicky-Bling-Bling
With Cammy Bean

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Welcome to The eLearning Coach podcast, online at thelearningcoach.com. I am Connie Malamed bringing new ideas and tips for success with creating online and mobile learning experiences.

Connie: Hello learning people, welcome to Episode 20 of The eLearning Coach Podcast. In this session I speak with Cammy Bean about many aspects of designing e-Learning. Cammy is the author of *The Accidental Instructional Designer: Learning Design for the Digital Age*, and she is also Vice President of Learning Designing at Kineo. We talk about being an accidental instruction designer using different learning strategies for different purpose: writing, the future of the learning professional, and a lot more. Here is the interview.

Connie: Hi Cammy, welcome to The eLearning Coach Podcast.

Cammy: Hi, Connie, thanks for having me.

Connie: I love your book, *The Accidental Instructional Designer*. Can you give us the back story on it, why you wrote it?

Cammy: Like most people in this business, I fell into it by accident, and over the years as I've been doing webinars and workshops at conferences and things, I've realized that that is the large percentage of people in this industry. People really like connecting and realizing that they're not alone in this business ... that they also fell into it by accident... that there is some random story about how they ended up doing eLearning, instructional design, and, wow, there's people I can talk to and people who are figuring this out as they along too. So I really wanted to speak to that audience and let people know that they're not alone, and give them tools and strategies and ideas to jumpstart that career,

because so often we fall into it and are figuring it out for the first time all by ourselves, all by our lonesome. So how can we help people jumpstart that, and I think a lot of the researches you provide do a lot of that as well. So it's finding this niche for people and helping them get started and be less accidental and more intentional in their practices.

Connie: In terms of the stories about accidental instructional designers, what are some of the common ways that people fall into the field?

Cammy: Commonly there will be someone who is a subject matter expert in an organization, and because they know the content really well, people say, "Hey, you should teach this, you should be trainer," and an instructional designer is born, and suddenly that's on their job title. Or someone might be good at PowerPoint and suddenly, "Hey, she's good at PowerPoint, why don't you start figuring out this articulate storyline thing?" And so it suddenly becomes this whole new world, and you start opening that door and people over time realize there is really a big career here, there is a big business behind this, there is a big practice behind this. But at first a lot of people get into it and they just have one very narrow vision of what that job means or what it is they're asked to do.

Connie: One thing I found about your book is that it really has a lot of tips and it's helpful for people who aren't accidentals also, there is a lot of good information in there. Why don't we turn design now, and we can start with subject matter experts. What are some of your recommendations for ways to work with SMEs (subject matter experts) so you can limit the content, which ultimately helps people learn more?

Cammy: Yeah, they want to do a mind meld with you and give you all the information that exists in their brain because they're experts, and everybody should know as much as they do. I think the key thing to start with when working with subject matter experts, one is to educate them. So if you're the instructional designer you have hopefully some expertise in your field and in designing instruction, and you can set it up with your content subject matter expert that way and provide them with a little bit of education. So talk to them about some good practices for instructional design. Experts don't realize that the beginner mind needs to have a much cleaner slate and to start more simply, so you can educate them and let them know that we really need to start simply, we need to

build the content in a way that's going to be meaningful to your audience. So I like to educate our subject matter experts in a number of different ways. One of course is one the process, let them know what this is going to look like mechanically, I'm going to need you to review this, and I'm going to need you to spend this much time doing such and such. But also to show them examples of good e-learning as you're going through this process, so that they can start to visualize what you are after. A big challenge at a lot of organizations is that the dreaded CBT Lady, as I call it, the computer-based-training lady, has been at work and she has created a lot of horrible e-learning in the guise of text bullets in PowerPoint slides that have audio timed to them, a truly awful experience but that is what e-learning is called in that organization. So you want to educate your subject matter experts that that's not what we're aiming for, we're trying for something different, and show them a lot of examples, and that will get the wheels turning in their heads, so that you aligned with them and they're aligned with you truly on what that vision is for this experience that you're going to be creating together.

Connie: I agree with you. I've found in my work that showing examples makes such a difference. And when I don't show examples because I'm in a rush and I forget to, I notice that when they finally see a finished product, they'll go, "Oh, that's what you meant!" Because they just can't visualize it, because there is no context. My favorite part of your book is the chapter called *What's Your Design Approach*. It seems like there is a real gap in practice, there is this feeling or sense that there is only one model that we can use for every different type of situation. And in practice it's just not like that. As you get more experience you use all different kinds of approaches. And I like the way you categorized it into three types, can you talk a little about what your course's purpose is so that you can figure out which model or approach to use during design?

Cammy: Sure. This is not an invention I came up with, in fact one of my colleagues at Kineo shared this with me, and I'm sure other people have similar models. When we look at a lot of the content that we get from our clients, and I even ask them, I'll say what is it that you're trying to do, are trying to create awareness and share information, are you trying to build skills and knowledge and actually teach them a process or the steps to a process, or is this a more complicated learning problem where you're trying to teach people how to solve problems, and you're ultimately trying to change behaviors. And it kind of goes on a spectrum, so there is three buckets, there is this sharing

information and creating awareness, there's building skills and knowledge, and then there is solving problems and changing behaviors. And it gets more complicated if you're going from the left side to the right side to that more complex. So finding out, figuring out, asking that question upfront of your subject matter experts, what are we trying to do here, what is our chief goal here? I'm not surprised by that percentage of time where people say, well, we're just trying to create awareness.

Connie: Like 90% of the time?

Cammy: Exactly. And so much of what we do in our field is really that. Julie Dirksen who wrote the book *Design for How People Learn*, one of the things she says is how do you know if it's in that second bucket, that building skills and knowledge? And she says, well, does it require practice, you need to be able to practice this skill in order to master it. I think that is the key differentiator. So that can be a really important way for you to figure out if you're just sharing information and raising awareness or are you to really teach a skill and build a skill.

Connie: That is a good criteria. What about the problem solving one?

Cammy: That was more complicated. I think we see much less of it in e-learning for a number of reasons. One is people are scared of it, because it seems like it's going to take way more time and way more budget to build something like that—and it might. Also people just default to doing that more complicated thing in a face-to-face environment, because then you can have the conversation and the debrief and you can really troubleshoot in that moment. But there are ways that you can tackle in an e-learning format. You can use a more immersive role-playing scenario that is essentially a branching exercise where you let people see the consequences of the choices that they make and see the impact of that. "Is this going to help me solve my problem? Actually when I say this I go down this rabbit hole and actually I've created more problems for myself." We can find ways to help people experience those mistakes and live out their consequences in the e-learning. You still might want to follow that up with more classroom or face-to-face time. The big different in that last model, that last bucket, is that changing behavior takes time. You're not going to change someone's behavior and imbed a new mindset or a new attitude in one e-learning experience, or

even in one classroom experience. The best models for those are going to be longer-term learning programs, maybe thinking more of it like a learning campaign where you're providing multiple hit points on that content, lots of opportunity to practice, a reinforcement of key messages. Think public service announcement that will send a message out, this is your brain on drugs, PSA from the '70s, you know that message that got repeated for many years and slowly started to sink into our psyches, and I think that learning campaign model can be really effective when trying to truly change behaviors, versus just creating awareness.

Connie: Is that why solving problems and changing behaviors are in the same bucket? Not that they're necessarily related, but because those two involve a longer timeframe?

Cammy: They're more complicated. In our modern world there is not necessarily a one right of doing something. You might want to give them an opportunity to experience it in a more immersive. So from a technical standpoint, building that course might be a little different than building an infomercial where you're talking about the five points of the new healthcare plan or something. So I put them in that bucket primarily for that reason, just more complicated content that you're trying to tackle in some different ways.

Connie: In podcast 19 I had an interview with Catherine Lombardozzi, who is writing about learning environments, and people who are interested in bucket 3, solving problems and changing behaviors, might be interested in finding out more about her work. Anyway, let's go on to the models for each bucket or each type of course purpose. Can you just talk about one or two models for each bucket, each category.

Cammy: Sure, I can talk about them for days, Connie. So the information and awareness often you're just trying to get a message out, you're making people aware that we have a new policy, you might be saying we want you to go off and read something a little bit more detailed. I think some great ways of doing that are not building a course, maybe it's a three-minute infomercial video, YouTube style video, think-commercial. And I really do like to reinforce that as e-learning professionals we are in the business of persuasion, and so we do need to think like marketing people and the infomercial and just anything in that creating awareness and sharing information. If you're thinking more like a marketing person you're going to get their attention in an

effective way and you're going to create some awareness, but you have to do it effectively, you don't want to just throw text bullets on a screen and call it done. So the infomercial is a lot of fun to do, and I think you see a lot more of this approach happening in the last few years where people are creating two to three minute little pieces and sharing those with their organizations. It's not necessarily even interactive, but really effective. For something like in the knowledge and skill builder's bucket, we have a great model, it's on page 66 of my book, and I won't go into it in great detail here, but essentially if you're teaching a skill and you're trying to embed some practice into the experience, you can set up the sections of each course by following these six steps.

One is you want to get the learner's attention, you want to find some meaningful way to pull them in, help them see what's in it for them, create some emotional hook to the content. You're going to set direction in the course, you're going to let them know what we're going to cover, not a boring learning objectives way, but just letting them know what they're going to get out of it and what to expect from the experience. You want to present the content, and there's a lot of ways of doing that. In fact, content presentation is almost its own sub-model, because you can have many ways of sharing content within a course. Step four is providing a way to practice that so you give them a case study, you gave them application-based exercises or just even questions the way that they're written in a way to help them start thinking about knowledge transfer and then how they're going to carry it back to their job. Step five is assessing and summarizing if you need to do any kind of quizzing. But you want to provide a meaningful of summary of the content in the course so that they have some kind of key that they're going to take away of them.

And then lastly a call to action. So step six of the knowledge and skill builder is helping them see how they're going to take this step now out to the real world. So maybe if you're just on sales training course, the call to action is write down the names of three people that you're going to call this week and try this process with. And get them thinking beyond the e-learning program and taking it out into the real world, because that's where this all matters out in that real world.

Connie: Right. For workplace training that's all that matters.

Cammy: Yeah. And then the last bucket, if you get into problem solving skills you want to start thinking about goal-based scenarios where you set the learner up. Okay, you're the chief operator of a nuclear power plant and we need to go in and clean the filter—I'm completely making this up. So you set up a scenario for them and they have a goal. You might provide the resources and access to information that they can refer to during the experience, but essentially you set them up to go in and try and figure out how to solve this problem. And there's lots of ways to do that, you can do it in a much more open 3D immersive environment, or you could even do just a simple multiple-choice questions that take you through their story and you have to decide what's the next right thing to do, and you're accessing these resources along the way to figure out the answers. So you're not shoving the content at them, you're not saying here is everything you need to know, you're saying here's the problem you need to solve, now make use of these resources. Because that's how the real world is, isn't it, we have to just go out and solve problems on our own in the real world, but here you're doing it in the safety of an e-learning environment, and giving them some feedback along the way, which can be really powerful.

Connie: And every problem is different and unique, because every human being is. So anytime you're working with people, it's going to be a different situation.

Cammy: You are right.

Connie: Let's delve a little bit deeper into the design guidelines or tips that you have in your book. I am thinking of the chapter called *The Hook*, because I don't really find it hard to grab the learner's attention, you can do that with surprise or evoking emotions or curiosity, but I think the bigger question is how do you sustain interest? And I noticed that you used the advertising model, how did you relate that to learning experiences, can you talk about that?

Cammy: Sure. The AIDA model, Attention, Interest, Desire, and Action, it's really a copywriting advertiser's model. If you look at a classic marketing campaign, we get their attention, and we bring them in, and we get them to notice the fancy car, we create some further interests, we help them see how it's going to relate to their own life.

Ultimately we create desire to this commercial, we want to people to buy something. And then that final A is the call to action. We want them to go out and buy this car that we're advertising. So advertisers do this really well, and it's all about pacing, and it's all about the messaging, and it's all about those emotional hooks and tethers you pull out there. And you might say I don't like advertising, it's just manipulative, and that may be true, but as I said earlier we're trying to persuade people to learn something new, to learn a new skill, to sustain behavior change, or whatever it is, so we need to think like marketers in this way. And so how can you sustain that interest through the learning experience? Well, you need to keep getting their attention again and again. So you can't just do it at the very beginning of the course and have some great hook that pulls them in, and then just have the rest of the course be boring, text bullets on the screen.

Probably every ten minutes – and I forget who says this, it might John Medina – I think one of his things is you need to get people's attention every ten minutes or so. So if you think about working down a learning experience into smaller sections, we know to chunk things down, but every time you open a new chunk you've got to get their attention again, and you've got to help them see why this matters, and you've got to always put those hooks out there. And just because you persuaded them once doesn't mean you're going to keep persuading them. You're sitting in a learning experiences and you've got lots of distractions and lots of things pulling on you, so make sure that the learning experience is pulling on them too and pulling them back in again and again. And that really depends on the content how you're going to do that. So that's a whole other conversation.

Connie: In terms of interactivity, you've been talking about Clicky-Clicky-Bling-Bling for a long time, I was wondering do you know if in the dictionary yet?

Cammy: I don't know. Clicky-Clicky-Bling-Bling, it's hard to say, but it's so fun to say.

Connie: Can you explain what it means and a few ways to avoid it?

Cammy: It's not a good thing. So Clicky-Clicky-Bling-Bling is something that you want to avoid. It's e-learning with a lot of whiz and a lot of bang but no substance behind it. It's animations on the screen that thrill and delight but ultimately distract from the

learning experience. Ruth Clark, Will Thalheimer have all written about this, they talk about these seductive details, they pull you away. It's that lipstick on a pig, and all you notice is the flashing light, and you miss the five really important content points that you should be paying attention to. There is a danger, we've got these great tools out there that enable us to do amazing things, and it's a responsibility that should not be taken lightly.

We should go forth and be very responsible about how we use these tools and make sure that the interactivity that we are embedding into our programs is meaningful and is actually going to connect back to ultimately that learning objective. And I like to say that the key ways to avoid Clicky-Clicky-Bling-Bling is to embed reflection in your course and make it meaningful to the learner. We can interact with content merely by thinking about it, so cognitive interactivity, make sure that people are thinking about the stuff and engaging with it deeply. And you can do that simply by writing a really good question that gets that person thinking about how this content applies to their world and how they're going to implement it. You can have worksheets that people have to fill out, the call to action could be you need to go out and have a conversation with a real-life person. You can obviously still have great meaningful interactions that require clicking, I'm not saying to do away with that, but make sure that they matter. Put your efforts where they matter.

Connie: Right. Avoiding Clicky-Clicky-Bling-Bling is good advice. Let's go on to writing, that's one of my favorite subject, and you do love writing too. What sorts of mistakes do you see or which ones do you think people really need to avoid when writing learning content?

Cammy: My number one tip for people is to keep it human. When you write an e-learning script, write it as if you are scripting a conversation that's going to be happening between two people sitting down at a coffee shop having a conversation. And so the tone is really important, you want it to be personal, and you want it to be human, you want it to be directed to the learner and you want to pull people in and making them feel like they're a part of it, and writing in that conversational tone that feels like the way we talk. And it can be challenging, since some stakeholders might feel like that's not professional enough, but of course it is, we have conversations with each

other in professional matters all the time, you can still be conversational and professional. Depending on your corporate culture, you might not be as cheeky in one organization as you would be in another, you might not be quite as sassy, or you might avoid slang or things like that, but you can still be conversational. Keep it short, keep it sharp, really focus the content so that you're only putting your energy and efforts on things that really matter and those key takeaways that you want people to walk away from the course with. So cut-cut-cut, and that goes back to the conversation we were having earlier about subject matter experts and making sure that you're not including the bath water and the kitchen sink with everything, and that you're really focusing on those critical elements. Yeah, keeping it human, man, that's my mantra, never forget that. Always remember that there is another person sitting down at that computer, sitting down with your e-learning, and they're not a robot, and they don't want to feel like they're interacting with a robot.

Connie: Do you find it's helpful to read it aloud, because I like that technique, just sit somewhere alone and read it aloud and just see how it sounds, does it sound conversational.

Cammy: I think for a lot of writers that is a great strategy. When I write I tend to talk to myself all the time, so I do that really naturally, and I hear it in my head. I'm better at it now, I've just been doing this long enough so that I don't need to read it out loud, but I probably should do more of that, and I know a lot of people say that that's the best strategy for them. So, yeah, find a quiet table where you can read your script out loud, especially if you're going to have someone narrating it.

Connie: It's a must if you're getting it narrated, for sure.

Cammy: Because you find all the stumbling blocks and the things that they're not going to read well because they're awkwardly phrased or just too long of a sentence. Short sentences is better than long sentences, easier to read and parse out.

Connie: There is this myth that writing in long sentences somehow shows intelligence, and I heard someone say once that you never hear anyone say, "Wow, those sentences were just too short." People don't mind that at all.

Cammy: That's right. Earnest Hemmingway was a master of the short sentence.

Connie: For the last question before we wrap up, I was wondering if you have thoughts about what the future holds for learning design, what kinds of things do you see on the threshold of happening in our field?

Cammy: In the future I think learning design becomes a bigger buffet that we have to be pulling from. I think technology just becomes accepted as part of a learning solution. I look at the way my kids access information and find out stuff. They are using technology all the time. My daughter wants to figure out how to do rainbow loom or whatever, and I don't have to prompt her, she's on her iPad, she's got a YouTube video app, she's got her rainbow looms, and she's making a rainbow loom and pausing the video. My son is figuring out how to set up some kind of a video game server, and he's figuring it out, he's out there searching and Goggling and finding stuff that he need and experimenting and trying. And this is just the way they do it, and they're using technology in the classroom. And they don't call it e-learning, they don't call it m-learning, it just is, it's just how you find out how to do the stuff that you need to do.

We're so compartmentalized right now in our industry, it's driving me bananas, like e-learning, m-learning, now there is a wearable-learning, it's a bit absurd. Of course we're all going to have specialties and we're going to have areas that we are more focused on, but ultimately a learning solution for an organization needs to look at that whole buffet of options that are out there and provide lots of ways for people to access and find that content in a really natural way. I have been thinking about this a lot recently and what does that role like, because you still need instructional designers for sure in all of that, because you're designing individual assets and you're making sure that the things that people find out there have a good shelf life and haven't expired, and can be found and are discoverable, and perhaps helping those materials. But just getting lots of things out there-- and I think as a learning designer the key takeaway to think about how you learn naturally, and how can you put that out there for the people that you are trying to support in your organization. How can you create that kind of a natural learning environment that includes technology that includes people that includes face-to-face?

I'm not even breaking down a distinction between informal versus formal learning, it's just this buffet.

Connie: I heard the term a-learning several years ago, which is Anywhere Anytime Learning, and that's probably where it all comes down to.

Cammy: Why do you need a prefix for a-learning?

Connie: Well, they were just trying to make a point.

Cammy: I know. It's silly though, isn't it? It's silly. It's just learning. Let's get rid of the prefixes.

Connie: But the prefixes are so nice.

Cammy: I know. You can trademark them and brand them.

Connie: There you go. Anyway, Cammy thanks a lot for your time, I know you're super-busy. It was a great conversation.

Cammy: As always, Connie, thank you so much.

Connie: I hope you found this podcast useful. It's always fun to talk to Cammy. For show notes please to thelearningcoach.com/podcasts/20. While you are there, you can add to this conversation by leaving a comment on the show notes page. I would love to hear your thoughts about anything we've discussed. That's it for now, talk to you next time.