



Elevating the Learntech Discussion with Tamer Ali

Leading Learning Podcast Transcript for Episode 294

Tamer Ali (00:00):

It's elevating the discussion and bringing it up to what we're really trying to do, which is with this audience. Not just about tech, and I'm a learning tech guy. I mean, that's my professional background, but I think we're sorely missing the target if we're just talking about tech.

Jeff Cobb (00:19):

I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:20):

I'm Celisa Steele, and this is the Leading Learning Podcast.

Celisa Steele (00:28):

Welcome to episode 294 of the Leading Learning Podcast, which centers a conversation with Tamer Ali. Tamer is founder of Authentic Learning Labs. Authentic aims to address the challenges of learning and development programs and elevate the status of learning within organizations by providing learning technologies and a global team to support initiatives. Authentic is not Tamer's first learntech company, and so he and Jeff talk about entrepreneurship, the evolution of the learntech market, and typical challenges for learning businesses. They also get into the importance of culture and strategy in making learntech work well for an organization, the Green Bay Packers, REI, and Reddit. Jeff spoke with Tamer in February 2022.

Jeff Cobb (01:22):

So what does an average engagement look like for you, to the extent that there is something that's average or typical? How would you describe, when you're going into work with an organization, what are you doing? What technologies are you putting in place? In what ways are you helping them to elevate learning, as you put it?

Tamer Ali (01:38):

Yeah, it's a great point. I'm not sure if there's a one-size-fits-all scenario, but typically the scenario does involve a pain point of delivery, experience, or data or any of those in combination, where a program needs to be launched, and there is some limitation or struggle or friction that's preventing that organization from launching the program efficiently or in time. So we get involved. And sometimes we bring our own tools; sometimes we use their tools. And we have to make sure everything works well.

Tamer Ali (02:09):

And so that's a general answer, but, in general, that's what's happening. There's a program—it's a certificate program, it's global in nature, and it needs to be integrated in and launched from an existing legacy LMS or a new LMS. We have to migrate users, we have to put a course together, and there's a variety of stakeholders that we need to appease and work with. That's usually our type of scenario.

Tamer Ali (02:34):

And it's typically a project that takes a month to four months. And we typically want to work like that, like a SWAT team. I think that's the general approach and scenario, but there is some in between. Someone we know in the past that have seen things we've done, they want to take one piece of our software and use it for a specific use case—syndicate content or wrap it around a course that's not compliant or track data. Those are the two big pieces of the type of work we typically do.

Jeff Cobb (03:02):

I want to come back in a minute to the types of software that you're using in that, but maybe even to step back before we do that because you've been at this a long time. I've been at this a long time, and we came across each other many years ago. When I first met you, you had founded a company called Digital Ignite. If I remember correctly, you'd been at a company called VCampus before that. So that was quite a while ago. But at this point you're someone who's built multiple companies. And I know you're a learner. So I want to ask about what you've learned from that. But, first of all, what's driven you to do that? Why have you felt this need to start companies and grow these ventures?

Tamer Ali (03:43):

It's a question we typically ask on those days when you have hard times, right? But why are you doing this? The whys are quickly answered when you see the impact. And maybe sometimes that impact doesn't happen every day, but when you see something and when it really works, when you see that a technology-enabled education initiative happens, and people are learning. I remember one of the main reasons why I stayed in this space is, in my initial company that I did not found but I was part of, Virtual Campus, we were trying to meet accessibility requirements for the government. And we were working with the veterans' administration, and I had to go in and sit with the lead accessibility advocate who was legally blind, who had a German shepherd right by his side, and he actually used the software to take learning.

Tamer Ali (04:32):

At that moment, you just break out of your box, and you realize what you're doing has significant potential, and you've been blessed with the opportunity to do it. And so if I get those opportunities, and those don't always come—you have the bureaucracy of the day-to-day—but, when you get those challenges, I wouldn't trade it for anything else.

Jeff Cobb (04:52):

And you just touched on an area I wanted to go to because I think for anybody who's an entrepreneur, anybody who's created anything, you have those moments like you're talking about where there're little victories. You feel like you have felt that success, a taste of the impact

that you're having. I'm wondering if you have other victories like that to share—would love to hear about that.

Jeff Cobb (05:15):

But then also the obvious pain points. When you reflect back on this journey, are there things that jump out to you that you're like, man, that was painful, but I'm sure you did learn from it and took something forward from it?

Tamer Ali (05:30):

Yeah, for sure. I mean, there's another one on our work with Crowd Wisdom and my most recent prior company, which we did co-found. We were working with a specific nursing field, the forensic nurses, and we learned that, if a nurse becomes certified with a forensic nursing credential, they can save lives. They can prevent a woman or a person, a child, or someone now and even in the military from being in a situation where, if they're in an emergency room and they're treating someone, they know how to ask the right questions. They need to be sensitive to the person, the patient, the victim.

Tamer Ali (06:07):

In this case, this is a criminal action, where they have to be sensitive to all the things. They can provide a successful witness case when they're called to the courts. So that kind of thing, when you hear about that, and you say, if you can deliver content to those people in a more accessible way using technology—because these people are busy or not able to go to a classroom—that's one of those successes that just drives you. That puts you over when you do have those challenges.

Tamer Ali (06:35):

In terms of the failures, there's plenty. I mean, there's too many to list. The frustrations of the day-to-day where you don't get to see that kind of success. I could probably point out many of them. The highlights are the ones you try to remember the most.

Jeff Cobb (06:48):

Yeah, definitely. Personally, as an entrepreneur, sometimes what's most painful is there's just a sense of frustration in having a vision—or at least you have the sense of a vision for where you're trying to go—but getting all the pieces to fit together and to really complete the picture, I mean, that's challenging, and it can be frustrating, day in and day out, to get there.

Jeff Cobb (07:14):

I'm wondering, and this may or may not apply here, but just to go back to your suite of products, and I've seen that emerge over the years because I recall, initially, Authentic Learning Labs really being focused on analytics. That seemed like the core of it. But you've grown from there in your own vision to now have an interactive video engine. You've got an LXP, learning experience platform. You've got this set of templates and APIs, high-grade hosting.

Jeff Cobb (07:44):

And you talked earlier about the challenges in e-learning and how to really serve the learning space. And I have a sense of these sort of emerging from that challenge, and it probably being frustrating at times, but now you've got this pretty interesting suite of products. So can you tell

us more about how you arrived at those products? What you see that mix of products is really solving out there in the world of learning?

Tamer Ali (08:11):

For sure. What seems to be an elegant tapestry that we've woven is really out of serendipity and also timing. We actually started the video process before we started all the analytics work, but we shelved it because the technology wasn't there for us. It was cost-prohibitive for us to do it.

Tamer Ali (08:28):

So, timing-wise, we spent a year and a half on video, and we realized, man, what we want to do is too expensive and complex. That was extremely expensive. One year of time is forever for us, for you as an entrepreneur. So we shelved that and moved to analytics. We always knew some of the pain points, and we knew some of the things we could do. You talk about the triumphs and also the control factor and having to be able to fulfill your vision. One of the key things we saw was, if we wanted to control our own destiny, we had to stay as nimble and small as possible, to build the product ourselves. The moment you have external stakeholders and owners, for the right reasons, they want their own growth. They want the pace to change. They have control and voice over where you spend the money and focus on.

Tamer Ali (09:18):

We've always at the heart thought that innovation in R&D will help the growth overall, long term. I'm sure someone will hear this recording and want to invest and just be deterred by that. But we thought R&D and innovation are at the heart of what we want to always do. That's the way we want to attract people. It's the way we can keep people, and we can keep clients. And so, when we go out with these products, we knew what we didn't want to do because we didn't want to go after an Articulate or Captivate or, in that case, Zoom. They are very strong platforms. We're using Skype right now. Very strong platforms. These things we knew we didn't want to do. But the thing is that with these tools, any of these tools, we had to make sure that we could build something successful but also be very specific so we did not go into a crowded pool.

Tamer Ali (10:02):

So we knew analytics, video, and the LXP spaces were enough of a niche where we could build something but were not too small where it was just what I guess would be called bleeding-edge technology and only one or two customers. So it's a very delicate balance. We're probably not there yet, but those are the reasons why we picked these three platforms. Not a huge vision initially. It was like, let's find all the flight places we can, and we see the pain. We're coming from the LMS space. We knew that everybody complains about reports. And we saw that visualizations. We didn't invent pie charts or bar charts or anything. We just wanted to put our lens on it for learning. And it's working in that regard.

Tamer Ali (10:46):

And then same thing with video. I mean, you see things that people are doing great with Vimeo and YouTube and all these other tools, Wistia. We just thought those are all very generic tools. Can you put it in the learning space? That's also worked. So these are the scenarios that we worked with.

Jeff Cobb (11:09):

I may be a little jaded, a little cynical, but I'm not sure I see as much innovation in the traditional learning management system space as I would like to see. And then that just begs the question—I'd love your perspective on it. How do you view the state and the role of the traditional LMS, learning management system, at this point? Particularly as somebody who came out of that world, as you indicated. You've got the roots in it.

Tamer Ali (11:36):

I'm with you. I want to sound optimistic, but I do see that there's a lack of innovation on that front. And I think what's happened in the learning tech space is we used technology to solve a scalability problem to deliver education. But now I think the promise is still not fulfilled, but the promise is helping the success of the learning, the meeting of the objectives of it, and the retention of the learning where technology can help. When we first delivered learning, we basically did what we saw in the classroom, we just converted it online. We even used the phraseology of books online or a page-turner. That's what really happened. The LMS was really a school online. You came in and did it. But now, I think, embedding the learning where it's relevant, when it's happening, when it's needed, to help measure the learning, to predict it, to potentially present learning that's more custom and tailored to the person through curation automatically or through the user-driven curation—

Tamer Ali (12:40):

those are things that are promising. I don't see the LMS space doing that as much more as the niche players and the platforms and tools that could be out there. It could fit nicely. I think the LMS will still be there, like a Salesforce CRM is doing. It manages the back end, the heavy workflows. And I think these LMS providers will probably just start acquiring these little niche players, but those things have to be around. Just like in a corporation, you have to have an ERP system and a CRM. I think the LMS will still need to be there to store grades, launch courses, but the other stuff can be diversified to these other platforms.

Tamer Ali (13:19):

And, like you said, I don't see a lot of innovation out there. Unfortunately, I think the investment money is going towards the digital diploma movement of getting out people and getting them into more alternative methods of delivering formal education. The edXs and the Courseras are getting the money, and that's great. And that's probably because the potential there, but there is a lot of cool stuff that people can do with the smaller tools that could make a big difference and impact in the learning. That probably was a long-winded answer to your question, but.

Jeff Cobb (13:52):

No, no. And, to stick with this underlying current of innovation, which I think is running through this conversation in different ways, in so many instances, innovation has happened. There are some very cool tools out there that can now be used in different ways, but they're not necessarily being used as they should be. And then, of course, in other areas, not a lot of innovation has happened. And, I mean, it seems almost like a mindset problem in many ways. I mean, when you look out at the world of adult lifelong learning that we're both in, where do you see gaps in how we think about and support learning for adults? Because it seems to me that probably underlies a lot of how we're going to think about innovation or not. Where are the big gaps in just how we think about this and how we value adult lifelong learning at this point?

Tamer Ali (14:43):

It's a heavy question. That's a big point. I think that we're not really looking at maybe a perspective of our audience members. We're trying to race to see what technology jargon we can adapt to, but really not going... And your organization does this really well is, what is the core business strategy, and what is our value proposition to this audience we're trying to serve? What's their core need? It is education. You're not giving away free iPads or Teslas. So these people are coming with a specific need. They're not going to always come to you recreationally. They're coming there for professional development or a skill that they need to be relevant in their marketplace. And are we thinking of the problems that they face? Are we presenting the learning in a way that meets their needs?

Tamer Ali (15:34):

Or are we just trying to say that we have an LRS? We have xAPI? I think, in learning, we tend to do that, where we're just trying to accessorize, to say that I've got this next thing. I've got this thing, I've got something fancy, but do we actually worry about the key strategic components of our objectives?

Tamer Ali (15:52):

I don't see that very much. I know it sounds like snobbery, but I don't see very pronounced, dedicated focus on the strategic elements of a learning program. And administrators of the LMS become the stronger voice in things. And it plays down the entire strategy and the operations. We need to have more people that speak to you, to Tagoras and analysts and thinkers that align the bigger picture, not just, okay, well, is it Articulate or Captivate?

Tamer Ali (16:23):

And those are great tools. It's elevating the discussion and bringing it up to what we're really trying to do, which is with this audience. Not just about tech. And I'm a learning tech guy. I mean, that's my professional background, but I think we're sorely missing the target if we're just talking about tech.

Jeff Cobb (16:38):

It's true. We've consistently found over the years, and it hasn't changed that much, when we do go out and survey organizations about the role that strategy plays in their learning businesses, the most of them don't have any sort of documented strategy for their learning business. And not that documentation is everything, but that's a signal. It's a symptom that maybe strategy isn't being taken quite as seriously as it could be or should be.

Jeff Cobb (17:04):

And, in many cases, we find even when there is a "strategy," if you scratch the surface, it really hasn't gone to the depth that it needs—as you're saying, to really understand the situation of the audience that you're serving, the needs of the individuals in that audience, and to align your mission, to align your business, and then to align your technology, to really helping them with that situation to create positive change in that situation.

Jeff Cobb (17:36):

Are there companies or organizations that you would point to who you feel are exemplary in how they're leading learning for their audiences, how they're leveraging technology to do that?

And these might be clients of yours, or they might just be other companies or organizations that you know of that you feel are maybe not completely getting it right but are getting it right in most ways.

Tamer Ali (17:59):

For the fear of excluding anyone, I'll just mention the symptoms that I see, or successful symptoms. And you brought up a point I totally agree with. The ones that are working, they have a clear alignment between the top and the bottom, in terms of from the executive level to the LMS admin. There's no disparity or gap between why everybody's doing something. And the places where I see the problem is, they have this big vision, but there's nobody to implement it, or there's an implementer, but there's no vision. And I think the symptoms are where it's successful. And I shouldn't say "symptoms" but the factors of success. Even if it's a small initiative, it's not always that they have this thriving ecosystem of everything working, the ones that are having this success that I've seen, they continue to try.

Tamer Ali (18:47):

They have an entrepreneurial makeup from the leader to the person that's running the platform, turning on courses. There's an entrepreneurial mindset. They're not playing down the technology. They make anything work. They might have a legacy LMS. They may have a new LMS, whatever it is. They have some goods and bads about it, but they take it in. It's all part of their plan. They continue to roll with the punches.

Tamer Ali (19:11):

And I think that's where I've seen success, where there's an organizational alignment. They move with quick and frequent success, and, many times—and I'm a vendor as well, I have to identify as it—but the vendors become less important in that space, in that kind of scenario, in a general scenario where they think the LMS is a panacea or the solution to all their problems.

Tamer Ali (19:38):

Now I do think the technology, the right partner, then obviously I have to do my job to present why we would do differently. But, in general, the plan and the approach will work all those things out. And, if the vendor's not working out, the culture in that process will iron that out. Find a new vendor and integrate it well within their ecosystem and the culture. That culture is key in the learning. And I see very few good successful cultures.

Tamer Ali (20:03):

They don't have to have a 20-year track record, but they have a good leadership, very clear direction, and that direction may be 90 percent of failures. But then, when they get the success, it's very nice. That's where I see that. And I purposely didn't use clients, but there are a handful of clients that I could say that would meet those criteria. And they seem to be the ones that they don't change providers that much. They stay with what they have, but they make it work. And they're not constantly... I think you probably talk to more people complaining about their platforms, whether it's whatever platform and not finding a way to just make it work and building around it.

Jeff Cobb (20:37):

That's true. That probably does skew my perspective a little bit.

Tamer Ali (20:42):

You hear, it's also the polarity of response rate. People are either very happy or very unhappy, but.

Jeff Cobb (20:47):

Yeah, definitely. Now, and you make a good point. Probably this is just part of me getting older and hopefully a little bit wiser, but I've just come to appreciate more and more the role of culture in any organization and any company, for that matter in any society, how it really sets the tone and how it provides the momentum or not to achieve those strategic goals that we were just talking about earlier and to set them in the first place. To switch gears a little bit, I've been wanting to have this discussion with you because it's something I think a lot about these days, and it's a place where I know you've had involvement, and I know you're monitoring as well, and that's that there's a lot of buzz right now around learntech. There's a lot of money flowing into learntech. You and I were both back there in the dot-com get days, to a certain extent. And, at times, it feels a little bit like that. I mean, I think it's different. I think it's much more legitimate now, but I feel like every other day I'm opening my e-mail box, and some company has bought another company. A lot of merger-and-acquisition-type activity going on. And, of course, that means a lot of disruption for learntech customers.

Jeff Cobb (21:53):

So I'd just like to get your general perspective on what's going on out there right now, what seems to be consolidation and a lot of money flowing in. There's always pain that comes with that, with the growth, with the consolidation. So do you see this as positive? Is the industry now evolving towards more maturity, more stability with more players, or is something else going on?

Tamer Ali (22:16):

Like you said, we've been monitoring this for a while. Yeah. It does feel like another one. And I would say to your point, Jeff, I do feel for an organization that makes investments and faces the upheaval of another vendor coming in or an organization being acquired. From the nonprofit side, where we both have experience, and we've seen it, I would say the nonprofits should gather together and leverage their strength in groups and collect those voices and find some way to either create some type of assembly that would help them purchase in bulk or to design in bulk. But collect the resources. One thing nonprofits do—I mean, I think we come in with a misunderstanding of nonprofits—they do have resources. They just have to be very mindful of how they expend them. But an R&D-focused nonprofit these days is much more safe and possible than a corporate entity that's R&D-focused.

Tamer Ali (23:13):

So I always wonder why don't the, let's say, healthcare or the building trades, instead of flaunting their next live event, collect the resources together to create some type of aggregate model of investment into technology. Putting the R&D together, they could do a lot of different innovation that they wouldn't be able to do and secure themselves from potential upheaval and the just natural corporate change that happens in the learntech space.

Tamer Ali (23:43):

On the corporate side, I think the best thing to do is make sure these groups that are investing, either side, I think, is to make sure that they probably have good lawyer advice but to build

contracts with an understanding that these organizations are going to be acquired and to put something out for them to either allow them out or to build in some way of facilitating a migration or something to keep business running smoothly.

Tamer Ali (24:11):

But I always like to see, the Green Bay Packers, just because, it's kind of an anomaly and a very different sport ownership model, but it's a successful one. They're owned by their fans. Why can't learning be the same way? Professional education, specifically certifications and certificate programs, they have very specific needs. They can come together and pool their resources together and do something. You have to adjust, and you have to sacrifice, but I think that's worth it.

Jeff Cobb (24:44):

Yeah, I hadn't thought of that perspective and approach before—sort of a collective bargaining in a way in the...

Tamer Ali (24:49):

Yeah, it's probably a terrible idea, but just one thought. Smarter guys like you will think of something better, but this is the thing—we can't protect people ultimately from the change that comes with money coming in and industries. But I think you can then use the numbers and similar voices or common needs to collect and do something like a cooperative or something like that. REI is another model of people coming together with a similar interest in building a model for business value-sharing.

Jeff Cobb (25:21):

Right, right.

Jeff Cobb (25:28):

I'd love to know what advice you have for a learning business that's looking to effectively use learning technology and trying to decide what to focus on and how best to invest in the near term. What pearls of wisdom would you offer to those organizations?

Tamer Ali (25:48):

That's very funny. You should quote that, "pearls," because they're not really. But I would say, whenever I work with groups, we try to have them focus on what's their intellectual property and what's their value-add. It's the content itself usually. And really make the investment in the content and the process around the content, the tools to help them build that content, and then leverage the technology they either have or make wise investments to improve that experience.

Tamer Ali (26:14):

But throwing a chunk of your investment, the majority, on a certain aspect, and it overshadows your key value, it's not what we would recommend. So we typically would say, if you're a learning business, then focus on what is your key product, which is typically the content, the certificate program, or your teacher, your instructors, or whatever you're teaching.

Jeff Cobb (26:37):

To wrap up, I'd love to ask you—I think you are a very thoughtful fellow, somebody who's obviously paying attention to the world and taking the time to learn and grow yourself. Obviously, learntech, very dynamic area, changes fast, but pretty much everything does these days. So I'd love if you could just share with listeners, what are some of your personal approaches to keeping up, to continually learning? And I mean that from the perspective certainly of work but just life in general.

Tamer Ali (27:08):

Well, first, thank you because I say that about you, but it's flattering to hear from someone else who I hold in high regard. But the thing for me is, I think, we have to take stock in every moment. People come into your lives, the experiences you have, take stock in every moment. Learn to take a step back, and just realize. In my later years, I've recognized to do that. And you just get lost in the day when you don't do that. And that has helped me learn—and to learn my significant many weaknesses. And when you recognize that you're constantly flawed, I think, the reaction is, when you recognize that, you want to improve it. At least that's the way I see it.

Tamer Ali (27:51):

And you may choose not to. I mean, the hardest thing is to decide to get up and do it, but whether it's physical or mental or spiritual, to recognize that you have these flaws, and that you're constantly flawed as a human being, to recognize others are, it puts you in a right position in the universe, and it constantly makes you feel like, okay, there's no reason for an ego. You haven't done anything. Continue to push yourself. Yeah. I mean, you should enjoy the success you have, but consistently push you because there's someone out there that's doing something better than you. Maybe having a harder situation and challenges.

Tamer Ali (28:23):

But that helps me. That helps me. The other thing is probably going to Reddit. And when you listen to kids and hear what sites that they go to for social interaction, I try to go there, not because—and I feel like the guy that we used to make fun of that probably dressed like Magnum PI and was too late to Corvettes and leather jackets.

Tamer Ali (28:41):

But now I feel like that. But I go into Reddit and some of these other sites to see what these people talk like and interact with and their dialogues with their peers. And that helps me. It makes me sound like the guy that's going into the party, and the old guy, but that helps me keep aware of what's going on. And whether they're talking about stocks they're pumping up because it's GameStop or whatever, but it's an interesting way of learning what people talk like and what they're looking at media-wise and consumption. And that does help me in learning.

Jeff Cobb (29:15):

What you're talking about is largely mindset. Having a certain degree of humility and modesty, realizing that we all need to learn continually, and being open to those new experiences that may feel a bit uncomfortable. I go to Reddit sometimes, and, I have to say, I feel like I'm a fish out of water there, basically, but.

Tamer Ali (29:33):

For sure. You have to look up the words they're using. The acronyms. And sometimes you feel regret to even look up things like that, but.

Jeff Cobb (29:41):

Yeah, but it's an important practice and it's an ongoing practice, obviously.

Celisa Steele (29:52):

Tamer Ali founded Authentic Learning Labs. You can learn more about his work at authenticlabs.io and connect with him on LinkedIn.

Jeff Cobb (30:01):

At leadinglearning.com/episode294, you'll find links to the Authentic site and Tamer's profile on LinkedIn because we don't want you to confuse him with the Egyptian rockstar Tamer Ali, just as I hope you won't confuse me with the professional wrestler Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (30:16):

At leadinglearning.com/episode294, you'll also find full show notes, a transcript, other resources, and options for subscribing to the podcast. To make sure you don't miss future episodes and to help us get some data on the impact of the podcast, we would love for you to subscribe if you haven't yet.

Jeff Cobb (30:35):

And we'd be grateful if you take a minute to rate us on Apple Podcast. Celisa and I personally appreciate knowing there are others on this learning and leading journey, and reviews and ratings help us show up when people search for content on leading a learning business. Go to leadinglearning.com/apple to leave a review and rating.

Celisa Steele (30:53):

Lastly, please spread the word about Leading Learning. At leadinglearning.com/episode294, there are links to find us on Twitter, LinkedIn, and Facebook.

Jeff Cobb (31:04):

Thanks again, and see you next time on the Leading Learning Podcast.

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, www.danosongs.com]