

Leading Learning Podcast Episode 269

Sam Sannandeji (00:00):

Technology, the way it's going is a lot of it is R&D. A lot of it is, like, we're still trying to figure out what that sweet spot is between AR and VR and MR or whatever the different X for the R is. We're trying to still figure out what is the one that people are going to like.

Jeff Cobb (00:21): I'm Jeff Cobb.

Celisa Steele (00:22):

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

Jeff Cobb (00:31):

Welcome to episode 269 of the Leading Learning Podcast. The fourth installment in our sevenpart series on the frontiers of learning technology. This episode features a conversation with Sam Sannandeji, founder and CEO of Modest Tree, a Canadian company providing immersive software to empower non-technical people to create and maintain their own augmented reality and virtual reality training. Before starting Modest Tree in 2011, Sam worked as a programmer in video game development. Recognized as a leader in XR learning, Sam brings technical handson expertise of how extended reality works to his understanding of the needs and pain points immersive technologies can successfully address. Celisa spoke with Sam in March 2021.

Celisa Steele (01:23):

So you and I are talking as part of a series that we're doing on the frontiers of learning technology. So I just want to start by asking, when you hear that phrase "frontiers learntech", what comes to mind?

Sam Sannandeji (01:34):

When you say "frontiers of learntech," it's the groups or the industries of people who are trying to change the scope of the platform as it exists. As the training is evolving, our consumption of it is evolving as well. Our attention span is lowering. We need more flashy things in front of us. And we've heard the phrase "death by PowerPoint" all the time. So, to me, it's like this frontier is hopefully we're in a direction of changing that and trying to, as everything else evolves, our phones evolve, our world evolves, our training also has to evolve.

Celisa Steele (02:08):

And so I think it might be helpful, as we begin to talk—because I know that XR is obviously an area of focus for your work—and so maybe just to do a little level setting. Could you briefly define *AR*, *VR*, *XR*?

Sam Sannandeji (02:22):

Yes, absolutely. There are three different things. Well, two of them are similar, but one is very different. XR is more of the variable of X. You can put whatever in there, and then the reality would end there. So it could be mixed reality or augmented reality or extended reality. Once you put the X in there, it could be whatever you want. However, VR is for taking someone into a virtual world that is immersing them into that environment and closing off our existing world we are in. So once you put that goggle on, I'm no longer at my desk. I could be in a soccer field and kicking the ball around. Now, of course, I have to stand, but. Or maintaining an engine. Or learning on how to do something within that space that creators created for me.

Sam Sannandeji (03:10):

But when we're talking AR, that's more of a wearable thing that we're just trying to augment our existing reality, let's say. Hopefully at some point we can use our normal glasses to do this or our contact lenses and get this data and information through, but augmented reality is to augment what we're seeing in the day-to-day. So I could look at this monitor that I'm looking at and have information about it popping out. Or data that can get delivered to me to augment my existing life, let's say.

Celisa Steele (03:39):

Thank you for those definitions. So which trend or trends in learntech do you think might be the shiny objects that we're pursuing but that are maybe distracting us from what really matters. Does anything come to mind that falls in that camp of maybe over-hyped?

Sam Sannandeji (03:56):

The shiny products that constantly gets released is a new headset that this company is working on or the new device that's going to be coming out. At the end of it, the truth of it is we get distracted by it because it's very shiny, and we see some material that the marketing team put together. And 90 percent of the time, it's not the real equipment or what we're going to get from that. Then you put the headset on, and you're like, "Well, that's not what they promised." But also the fact that there's a new device, and it's very confusing what does what and not getting lost into the new wearable or the new headsets coming in until it becomes something that all the consumers can pick up out of the store, and you don't need to spend upon thousands of dollars to get access to one or be part of the special group to get access to this device.

Sam Sannandeji (04:41):

They're distracting from the fact that, hey, VR is great when you want to use it for the purpose of giving muscle memory and giving people, taking them and immersing them in that environment and learning. It's better than sitting behind your computer and clicking with a mouse for the purpose you want to use it. So the focus for learntech, for me, it's about what are the stuff that's going to go through it and how we can evolve the old way of doing things of training through these technologies, not to get where a shiny object gets derailed of, "Let's integrate this new headset."

Sam Sannandeji (05:13):

We have that happen to us in our company. We have a lot of tech people here, and they see a new headset that Microsoft announces or some other company announces, and they're like, "Let's go order one. Let's see how it works." And it's like, "Well, no. No, we have to first figure out how the first one we wore, or the idea behind it, the delivery was supposed to be done." So to shorten what I said, it's basically all the new marketing material and the use cases we see on

YouTube and the new headsets coming out, not to let it derail the main concept of actually the method of delivery of the content.

Celisa Steele (05:47):

And so then, on the flip side, are there trend or trends in learntech that you think have the most potential for significant positive impact in the near future? And by near future, I'm thinking roughly three years out.

Sam Sannandeji (06:03):

I mean, hopefully there are trends that these devices or equipments are becoming mainstream, that they are becoming something that you can spend half a price of your phone, or almost the same price as your phone on it. Now, when it comes to the usability of these trends, it's been great that I'm seeing that a lot of companies are getting involved and giving it a chance of, "Let's try something." Or a lot of educational areas are like, "Hey,"—especially with the current state of the world, it has helped move that forward—as like, "Hey, we have to be home, might as well do it in the VR and learn that way with our classmates but be immersed in this different world because we can't meet face to face or be on campus. Do something."

Sam Sannandeji (06:45):

So the opening the road to the new tech and evolving the game technology into the training side and learning has become very valuable. And if, as long as we continue that way, and also the hardware follows us along, the trend will continue, and we will be at a point that everybody could be able to have a headset, and they're okay with this new method of delivery and now can comfortably use it.

Celisa Steele (07:12):

Broadly, how would you characterize the future of XR? And I'm going to, again, keep you on that relatively short timeline of roughly three years out or so. Do you think there's going to be major breakthroughs in the next three years? Is it going to be more of incremental innovation? Is it going to be a mix of breakthrough and incremental innovation? Is it going to be something else?

Sam Sannandeji (07:35):

For XR side of things, it always comes down to the lower technology that's underneath it. We have seen huge leaps in graphical powers of computers lately with some of the new graphic cards coming out. We've seen some new leaps in the chip sets for the phones that are coming out that are allowing us to push the boundaries for XR technologies as well. The thing is that currently, with the state of technology, the way it's going is a lot of it is R&D. A lot of it is, like, we're still trying to figure out what that sweet spot is between AR and VR and MR or whatever the different X for the R is. We're trying to still figure out what is the one that people are going to like.

Sam Sannandeji (08:21):

In three years' time, our technology of hardware goes to a point that I can put my sunglasses on, and I can buy that sunglasses for the same price I buy a normal sunglasses, maybe a little more, and I can get that augmented feedback out of it. Sure. I mean, Google Glass tried, but the idea was great; the execution wasn't turned out as well as it was hoped. And until we get the mainstream usability out of it, and the hardware cost is the key thing. In the next three years, I don't think we're going to make that huge leap, but I do see in the next five years or six years, if

we get to a point that there is a standard in the industry of VR headsets, and there's a standard for AR headsets. Right now, I mean, if you look at phones, almost every phone you look at, it doesn't matter if it's Apple or Android, they all look the same and work the same. That turned out to be a standard.

Sam Sannandeji (09:12):

The hardware is different, but interface-wise you have your little buttons, and you click on it, then something happens, and you go to your app, and so on. Until we get this technology to that point, from the hardware perspective and a technology, like the usability perspective is there. And the good thing is, the gaming industry is pushing out a lot for us. Gaming industry is taking it, pushing it a bit more forward, but there still is yet to be that standard headset. If I ask anybody who works in this industry and say, "Hey, what's your preferred VR headset?" Every one of them will have a different one, from a different brand, from a different company.

Celisa Steele (09:46):

I think that's a really interesting point about needing more standards, more uniformity so that there can be broader adoption, right? So that whether I pick up headset A or headset B, I can make use of whatever educational experience is available to me. And that the experience would be roughly the same, like you were saying, regardless of which operating system you're on for a smartphone, for example.

Jeff Cobb (10:12):

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Celeste Martinell (10:19):

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Jeff Cobb (11:07):

We're truly grateful to BenchPrep for helping to make this series possible, and we encourage you to find out more at benchprep.com/resources. Now, back to Celisa's conversation with Sam Sannandeji.

Celisa Steele (11:21):

So I've been asking about that relatively short timeframe, the roughly three years out. You were saying that you think in XR it's going to be R&D but no huge breakthroughs. You were saying a little further out, there may be more of this standardization, and costs may be coming down. But any other thoughts on, out in the future, what XR might look like?

Sam Sannandeji (11:44):

Usually, if you're looking at technology, there is that three release lifecycle that the best one usually comes out. So the first one is usually the device, or the hardware, or whatever it is comes out, and it's always like, "Hey, this is innovative, and it's amazing, but you know what, it's not accessible, and it has all these glitches, and issues and usability problems." Then the second one will come out, and they improve upon that, and the price goes down, and many different things happen, and technology gets better, and they learn from the last one. Then the third release comes out that usually is the one that makes things a lot more easier for the users, and it makes it almost closer to mainstream as possible, which becomes where we need to be. But right now, in many cases, we're in that second line, and I feel that, going back to that standard, there is stuff in the next 10 years that I have a feeling that we'll have a breakthrough, which is... I mean, there's technology right now and work to make contact lenses that have chips in them for augmented reality.

Sam Sannandeji (12:42):

Now, the real question comes: Are you going to put that in your eye, right? So that's the other part of it is that many of us will be like, "I would never put a chip in my eye. Even though it's a contact lens that I can take off, I don't trust it. What is it going to do to my eye?" And there's also the lack of information of spending 20 hours in VR—is that acceptable? Or having that AR headset or sunglasses that gives me information, are we okay with that? There's a lot of unknowns here for us to discover. But in the next 10 years as the graphics and the hardware and the chips grow, also with 5G being introduced—5G coming through and allowing us to get access to that dataset, the information that we need in a lot faster and more speedy way of getting access to it—then it seems that we are moving to that direction of making it mainstream.

Celisa Steele (13:33):

If we collectively get it right, what do you think is the good that we might see from either learntech in general? Or if you want to focus it on XR or AR or VR. In the near future, that next three years, what would it look like to get it right? What are some of the things we would have to do to get it right, and what would be the good that could come from it?

Sam Sannandeji (13:56):

I don't think we should look at it and say *if* we get it right. I think we should get it the right. Because with the new workforce coming in, kids that are in their 20s, and they're just coming in from school, they have a different way of thinking and educating than we do. If we're talking workforce, even if during the education time, while they're in high school, they have a different way of growing up than the way I was growing up, which was, "Here's a bunch of books. The teacher's going to talk briefly about it, and let's go." Or, "Here's this manual. Figure it out." And maybe there is—if you're lucky—there's an online course that you can click and go to PowerPoint slides and have some video.

Sam Sannandeji (14:33):

But with the current kids and the current way the youth is coming up, it's something that we need to keep their retention of their attention in there. Then the retention rate drops if the learntech is not there to evolve the type of training we're doing. So what we need to do is collectively try to improve the methods of learning as much as we can to the direction that it has the highest retention rate. And, as it seems, based on some set of dataset that exists out there— of whatever level of research that was done, it's not high—but the retention rate is a lot higher than sitting behind the monitor when you introduce XR. So you get the engagement up; you get the retention up; then we allow the new workforce that is replacing myself and the others to

come in and say, "Hey, we learn in a better way, but also I'll go a lot further using AI and being able to capture that legacy knowledge to get feedback into these training methods."

Sam Sannandeji (15:35):

Then we end up doing something that not only we're improving the training as we're going because the old days of manually building these teachings might not be the best option—we might want to look into doing data-driven teachings and data-driven training for when it comes to that. And then use the data we get from the end case, which is the learners from the other end, to improve that learning, and then, at the same time, use our own knowledge that as we're evaluating that to give that the legacy knowledge so they can even learn better, and our knowledge doesn't go with us when we leave.

Sam Sannandeji (16:11):

That happens a lot in the maintenance world. You have someone who has been in a job for 30 years. The manual might not say, "Take that cable, and put it on a side when you open the cover," but he knows to do that because, if he doesn't, that cable's going to fall behind the cover, and he has to dig for it. Well, how do you capture that, right? So if we could be able to use a proper feedback mechanism of the teaching and the learning to be able to evolve that and then deliver it through a method of delivery that these youth that are coming through are comfortable with, I think that's where we start getting somewhere with it.

Celisa Steele (16:44):

I really like the emphasis you put on both the potential of learntech during the learning experience, to make that actual content that needs to be taught more engaging. You also mentioned then the after-the-learning experience, that the retention can be higher using some of these learntech tools. And then that last point around pulling out the tacit knowledge, the knowledge that resides within the workforce that may not have been pulled out, and that learntech has the possibility to really help us in all those dimensions, which we know are so important to effective learning. So, on the flip side, if we get it wrong, what are the dangers that might come from XR or, more broadly, learntech if you'd like? What are the pitfalls that we have to avoid?

Sam Sannandeji (17:36):

We have this problem right now with phones that you see many times, and there's a lot of memes about these people sitting around the dinner table, and they're all looking at their own phone. Well, imagine instead of having my phone in my hand, I'm spending 10 hours in this headset. I am talking to everybody virtually. I am fully comfortable doing so because also there's certain fears and anxiety that doesn't exist there anymore. I don't have to worry to look someone in the eye because some people are not comfortable with that. And I come from, like I mentioned, from the programming background. Well, 90 percent of the programmers—this is just a number I came up with, don't quote me on it, it's not written anywhere—but, from the ones that I've met, are introverts. They don't like to talk to people as much. They don't like to engage. They like to do the task and the code and build very cool tech, but they like to live in their own little bubble.

Sam Sannandeji (18:25):

And VR and XR makes that, in the positive side, makes that very easy to do and makes that they can engage and talk to—and a lot of them are gamers, so gaming does that. You can talk to someone you don't know across the planet, and it's good for that, but also it's bad that you just might get used to that world, and you lose the social skills, and you become very comfortable.

"I'm going to live in my XR world." That's one part of it, of course. The other part is we become too reliant on it, right? With all the heads-up displays and all the technologies, for example, that are going into cars. Well, a lot of the new cars that are coming out of Europe are having augmented reality, which is the heads-up display. They're reflecting your speed and a bunch of information into your window in front of you so you don't have to look down or even be aware of it nowadays with all the sensors around the car, that blocking.

Sam Sannandeji (19:12):

So at what point does this stop, that we've actually become really bad drivers because we're relying on all this technology to help us or to become an autonomous driving, so that we're not even driving. So there's pros and cons. There are certain skillsets that we're going to lose in the process. It's a learning balance, I guess, that, as a unit, we have to work together to not lose some of those skillsets that we gained. But, I mean, it might not become necessary anymore. It's not that it's a bad thing that you forget how to talk to someone face-to-face or forget how to drive a car if there is no car to drive, and all the cars are automatic. Well, who cares if you can't drive, right? So it's how much do you want to stick to the legacy information we have or the knowledge we have versus the technology moving us forward?

Celisa Steele (20:01):

I want ask if you think there are problems or opportunities that we need technology to address. So, in other words, what can't we do without XR? Are there things that fall in that realm for you?

Sam Sannandeji (20:17):

As human beings, we are able to adapt to whatever you throw at us. So we're adapting to it without the XR at this moment. The real question is we always look at how we can improve it. And if you're talking organizations, usually they always have two things in mindset. One is how they can make more money, or how they can save money. And if we're talking about educational stuff and schools and universities, how can we teach better? And how can the students learn better? So it's all about making what we have better. We didn't need cars because we had horses, but we made the cars anyway. We didn't need airplanes because we had cars, but we made airplanes anyway. And we're making jets and so on because it just makes certain things better. How can we take that time—because time is something we can't get back—how can we take that and, instead of taking us ten days or ten months to do something, make it in five months and, at the same time, get the knowledge base back?

Sam Sannandeji (21:13):

And I'll give you a very easy example of that. As it stands currently, we can all open a PDF document and read about how something works. And I'll even go lower to, let's say, IKEA. We go buy IKEA furniture. We have the manual sitting next to us. But we can put it together. It can take us an hour, or it could take us 20 minutes. But if we have some XR technology or maybe augmented technology that's feeding us information through our glasses or something, as we're putting it together, by detecting what we're looking at, well, that process becomes more streamlined. And, instead of us frustrating and putting the wrong bolts and assembling it five times wrong, we just did it by following the information that's coming to us through some object detection and recognition and what we're doing in a lot faster and more meaningful way.

Sam Sannandeji (22:02):

And that applies to all industries, having real data from... If you're taking your car for a technician to support, if he can see everywhere within your car, based on the sensors and the

dataset he's getting where every piece of equipment in your car is functioning and what's working and what's not working, he can diagnose it a lot faster and more accurately than trying to say, "Well, I think it's this thing. Let's go replace that." Or, "Usually it's this." And then you find another issue comes out. Kind of that lifecycle of your product starts improving as well at the same time. So it's not that we can't do things without XR, it's how can we use it to amplify our processes and the way we do things?

Sam Sannandeji (22:43):

But also one of the risks we face is, as I mentioned, the new workforce coming in has no interest in our old way of doing things. I work a lot in the military space, so many of the new recruits, or even in OEM space, many of the new recruits that are coming to do manufacturing and stuff, they are not very comfortable with sitting in a class and spending five days looking at slides of this guy talking about "next page" and "next page." What they want is like, "How about you give me a version of this equipment that is in a virtual world that I can play with the way I want using your guidance to learn?" And, also, there's no cost of destroying real equipment. "Also, you can train me on the untrainables." You can set that engine on fire or...

Sam Sannandeji (23:30):

How do you teach someone what to do if an aircraft wing falls off? But if you can show it to them in a VR world, and then they react to it, and they create the responsive to it, and they feel the situation, then they get to do it in real life but you never actually damaged the real equipment. So there's those benefits that also comes with it.

Celisa Steele (23:49):

What advice do you have for a learning business that is looking to get started in XR, and they're trying to decide what to focus on and what to invest in the near term?

Sam Sannandeji (24:02):

But the advice I would give is not to get locked into the flashiness of things. A lot of companies make the mistake of seeing something in AR and VR and immediately getting the device. And then at the same time, hiring some students from university that just graduated and say, "Hey, go build me this prototype." And they're like, "Wow, we made this prototype in three months. Well now, let's apply it to our whole organization." Well, that doesn't usually work that way because it's going to take years of planning, and, if you want to do it through right, you want to use your old data to help your new methods of delivery, not building things from scratch. Not that prototyping is wrong, it's just not falling into that hole of, "Hey, we just did the prototype. It either worked, or it didn't work because we didn't execute get it right. So therefore XR is not for us."

Sam Sannandeji (24:54):

I always hear this from people that are like, "Oh, I tried VR before. I didn't like it." Or, "I tried it, and it's not for me." It's like, "Well, what did you try? You can go drive a tractor and not like it, but, if I give you a Formula 1, you would like that, right?" So there is a difference there. And also, as technology grew, some people have tried it five years ago where VR headsets or devices were very clunky, made many motion-sick because the frame rate was low.

Sam Sannandeji (25:20):

And now with the current tech and a lot of the new stuff that people putting all this optimization and effort in, we understand then how to not make people sick. The sick rate, as

getting motion sick from the content, has dropped. I would say, instead of doing a prototype project, is trying to do a data-driven focus on and trying to expand it from one prototype and try to use, not to fall into the traps of press releases and these marketing videos that show you something extremely amazing that was rendered and being able to tell the difference between the rendered marketing thing and the real life thing that is going to be your stuff.

Celisa Steele (26:05):

Are there particular ingredients or factors that you think contribute to organizations' successful use of XR?

Sam Sannandeji (26:14):

To me, the big challenge I see many organizations have is that they treat XR technology as the same old way of doing training. And the problem with that is, because you're getting into that third dimension—when you're talking about the XR, it's no longer two dimensional things, we're talking three dimensional things—and if you're talking AI and you're talking about 3D content and data-driven and so on, and trying to build a holistic thing that you can have a full-feature product that is useful day-to-day and can grow, you can't just throw one student at it or two students at it. It's its own department. So having multiple people in the company doing a prototype is one thing. Being able to launch a successful product—and the key thing, a lot of the companies don't realize, is the maintainability of code.

Sam Sannandeji (27:09):

When you write code, code is like fruits. If you don't maintain it, it rots. So code that sits there, that doesn't get updated, it rots and it becomes... I give you a very simple example. If I use my phone, and I make an app for my phone, and it's perfect (even though there's no such thing as perfect code because applications always have bugs, but let's say it's perfect), and it works 100 percent of the time. Well, you know what? A week from now, when Apple releases their update, they're going to break my app some way. Maybe not this week, but they will break it next week. And as long as I'm not touching it, I'm not updating it, therefore it's dying.

Sam Sannandeji (27:47):

So building XR technology or immersive training is the same way. If you're not constantly updating it, it rots, and it becomes useless. Companies spend millions of dollars building training, but six months from now, let's say we buy a car, and I have all this training about my department, about my new car, and they all know how to maintain it, but there's a recall. And we changed a piece of equipment now, that the three steps were added, but the documentation and the XR training doesn't have that. How do you deal with that? So that's one of the things that being able to have a team. It's all about having a team that is dedicated—and three people is not a team. You need a proper dev team from design, to development, to maintenance that are working all together to maintain that dataset and content.

Sam Sannandeji (28:37):

And a lot of the organizations make this mistake of either forcing people that are not in that role to those roles that don't know how that works. There's a reason that the gaming industry is separate, on its own thing, because there's teams of designers, developers, testers, maintainers that are sitting there, building that, and constantly making sure it's running. So the same thing applies to an organization. If they want to be successful at it, create a team. If you don't want to create a team and have the overhead of 20 people doing that for you, then partner up with a company who can.

Celisa Steele (29:08):

Are there practical tips or suggestions about how to make practical use of AR or VR specifically for learning and education or pitfalls to avoid? I know you've just touched on keeping the code fresh and making sure that you have that team in place to do that, for example. But any other thoughts around either dos or don'ts around successful use of AR and VR?

Sam Sannandeji (29:33):

Find the reason you want to do this for, and, once you find that reason, that would give you a target to be able to quantify, because it's always about the return on investment, right? If I'm going to spend a million dollars or a hundred thousand dollars on doing something that has been working for years, what is the outcome I want to do out of it? Is it that we're going to be safer, our staff going to be having a safer environment to work with when it comes to anything they're doing that is related to their work, from equipment damage to equipment failure to fire and safety hazards? Or is it something that we want people to have a better retention? Because we forget things. I mean, do you remember what you were taught when you were in grade three? I don't remember.

Sam Sannandeji (30:18):

It was great, but I don't remember any of it. And this happens a lot in the industry that if we're talking, say, Navy, the soldiers learn certain tasks that would never happen until 20,000 hours into the ship's lifecycle. Well, how are you expecting them to remember that and have that retention, right? So my advice is always find the actual pain that you're trying to solve. Then find how you want to solve it through what technology and what is the outcome for it. Because once you have that, you have your ROI, and now you can actually quantify it and say, "Hey, we were doing this this way. We use this technology. Of course, we had a bumpy road"—because you definitely have a bumpy road, expect that it's not going to be smooth sailing until you figured it out—"but this is the outcome we got. We had the students who didn't like this course, but now we have the students fighting to be the best in this course. And now they're learning better."

Celisa Steele (31:15):

I really appreciate, in particular, that emphasis on why—getting really clear on why you're even going to try AR or VR, XR, whatever any tech is. Because if you're not clear on why you're using it, you don't have anything guiding all the choices that have to come once you've decided to explore that. So I appreciate that emphasis on getting clear on why you're doing it.

Jeff Cobb (31:43):

Sam Sannandeji is founder and CEO of Modest Tree. Based in Nova Scotia, the company provides immersive software for enterprise digitization. Sam is passionate about educating others about the practical possibilities of XR. You can connect with him on Twitter and LinkedIn.

Celisa Steele (32:00):

You can find show notes at leadinglearning.com/episode269, and the notes include links to Sam on social media, along with a transcript and other resources related to this conversation.

Jeff Cobb (32:14):

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Jeff Cobb (33:00):

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

[music for this episode by DanoSongs, <u>www.danosongs.com</u>]