

Almost There

An Emerson Collective Podcast

Episode 10: Could virtual reality make us better coworkers?

Dwayne Betts:

In my world, fiction and poetry is the way that you ask someone to put themselves in the soul of another person. Someone they may have different life experiences from, but someone they could learn to empathize with if they could see the world through their eyes. My guest on this episode is a kind of writer herself. Elise Smith basically does the same thing that poets and writers do, but she does it for the workplace. She's the co-founder and CEO of Praxis Labs, which has developed a virtual reality program that puts you into the shoes of someone who is not like you. It makes you actually feel and experience what it's like to be that person at work. It helps you change your perspective, but it also helps you actually practice change in behaviors.

Elise Smith:

Who we are at work is who we are in our lives, and if we can transform that, if we can help build those, that empathy, awareness, and also the skills to engage across difference, that will permeate beyond the rounds of the workplace.

Dwayne Betts:

Praxis Labs has immersive program and focused on more inclusive hiring and onboarding, and with many Fortune 500 companies using Praxis today, Elise is already helping to evolve the modern workplace as we know it, by helping us all see each other more clearly. I am Reginald Dwayne Betts. This is Almost There, a podcast from Emerson Collective.

I'm excited particularly to talk to you because, and it's actually related to the work that you do. We pretend like we live in a world without bias, at least when it comes to how we interact with the world, and then we are ready to acknowledge the biases of the world when it comes to how the world interacts with us. So, I knew what the project was and what the work was, and I saw the name Elise Smith and I was like, "Oh, this is interesting. I wonder what Elise will look like." And even in my head, I coded the question because I didn't want to admit the absurdity of articulating that.

And then when I saw your picture and I had this joy, then I had to numb down the joy because again, I was like, "Wait a minute, is my joy acknowledging that I expected you not to show up as you are? A Black woman in a tech space that is not consistently open, I think, to Black women, and doing this particular kind of work that is sort of thought-provoking. And so, I wonder how would your work help me deal with my own bias?"

Elise Smith:

Yeah, it's such a powerful question, and I think, our hope is that we can use immersive experiences, whether it's, they're completed in a VR headset, or honestly, on a web browser, on a desktop or laptop computer, on a smartphone app, that we can build empathy and awareness in these experiences. And we do that through perspective taking. So in each of our scenarios, and you take on a perspective, it might be a perspective in which you share that intersectional identity, but oftentimes, it's not. And you get to go through workplace scenarios where you encounter barriers to equity, barriers to inclusion, incidents of bias, and you get to build this awareness and an empathy for an experience that you may not have. And so, instead of the question of, how would Praxis help you act differently in that moment?

It would start with you thinking about what it would feel like to be me walking into a room and have someone be surprised or disappointed with the physical form in which I showed up in.

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, that's interesting.

Elise Smith:

And it allows you to take that new perspective to build, to say, "Wow, I've actually never been a Black woman and had my hair touched without me asking". And I've heard that phrase, "Don't touch my hair from a salon song maybe, but I didn't realize the impact it could have, how it might make me feel both othered, dehumanized in a way, and both seen as something, as an object in many ways." And it's that building of, "Huh, I now understand what that could be like," in a base level, right? Because it's not your full lived experience.

But once you build that empathy and awareness, we actually take it a couple steps further where, all right, build that empathy awareness, then help folks identify when something's amiss. So, like you just did Dwayne, you're like, "I realized that I was, had a positive reaction, but it could have been negative." That's an awareness moment of an aha. And then the next step is actually what do you choose to do with that empathy, with that awareness, with that understanding that something could go wrong or might go wrong? And then what behavior do you take to actually create more inclusion, create more equity? And so, you might build a skill of constructively questioning, asking, "Wow, I'm curious to learn more about you," instead of making an assumption about someone.

Dwayne Betts:

So, what I think is really interesting about that is, I guess, because I'm a Black man, I've always thought about empathy as being something that people lack in their interactions with me. And so, I hadn't even thought about, I hadn't even thought about the possibility that when I put the headset on, I was going to become somebody else. I was thinking to myself like, "I got this cornered, I got the whole market cornered on suffering. You name your person and I understand, I relate."

I do think it's interesting. You walk into a room and people applaud your presence, but sometimes, applauding your presence can just be as anxiety producing for you as the bigotry, right? I think that one subtle shift in perspective makes me think a lot about the value of this work you're doing.

Elise Smith:

Yeah, I appreciate that question and your reflection there because it's definitely something I've thought about pretty recently, and we had in a recent module that I knew the topic was around neurodiversity, I knew kind of the characters and all of that. But when I went through the experience taking the perspective of Diana, and it is someone who, a woman living with autism who is in a workplace, and the first scene is someone starts singing. You walk into a room and it's actually a surprise birthday for you, and they're singing happy birthday. But in the experience, your heart starts beating really loudly, and it just becomes so clear that you're incredibly uncomfortable.

And throughout the whole experience, taking the perspective of Diana, I was realizing there are so many ways that even I as a leader can better create spaces and meetings and norms that serve all of us, everyone, including neurodiverse folks, and moving slowly, sending notes in advance. Just a bunch of things I learned personally from the module. And so, I have those aha moments all the time too, Dwayne. And I think it's not just taking the perspective of someone who's encountering maybe barriers to equity or incidents of bias, but you also get to take the perspective of someone who's a bystander. I

think we've all been bystanders in these moments, but we don't know how to necessarily engage and respond, so we build that practice.

Dwayne Betts:

And we like to pretend that we don't, actually. I feel like one of the worst things that we do to young people is we act as if the way that we've come to deal with regular situations that happen all the time, a grievance at the grocery store, how you conduct yourself when somebody honks the horn at you. We act as if all of these customs that make us who we are, and so that distinguishes us in terms of how we treat each other, are things that we were just born with. I find myself sometimes talking to my children and realizing that, because they live in a far less stressed life than I did as a child, they actually have had less situations that forced them to figure things out on their own, and they require more.

And as the world has changed and we have different kind of communications with teachers, with coaches, with adults, it requires young people to learn how to communicate in a different way with teachers, with coaches, with adults. But when I was young, we didn't talk to adults. So I wonder if you had any experience with how your tech is teaching people how to interact with each other across the age spectrum. But I wonder if there's other situations that somehow similarly map on the way we deal with somebody who we would otherwise in ways that don't have to do with, say, race or gender.

Elise Smith:

Absolutely, and I think an important context is all of our experiences take place in the workplace right now because that is the lever of change in which we're trying to move the needle on equity inclusion in workplaces, but also in society because where we reach the most people. But we definitely have scenarios and perspectives that go beyond race and gender. I talked about neurodiversity, we talk about intergenerational, we talk about religion, all of the things and all of those perspectives are represented within some of our content, some of our library.

But I think what is powerful about our work is we recognize we'll never be able to cover every intersectional identity, every single scenario of potential workplace bias or lack of inclusion or lack of equity. But what we can do is help folks build the muscle to be aware of differences overall, to be aware of situations where more equity or inclusion can be there, and to apply their learning from one context to the next.

And I think that goes beyond the workplace because these are empathy and awareness and skills that you don't turn on or off when you walk into your place of work. You actually take them with you throughout your life. One of our, when we, it was a scenario around gender bias in the workplace, and you took the perspective of a woman who's doing a presentation with a male colleague, and you're prepping and you're working, you're doing the research, you have a section that you've owned. And you go into the meeting, and right as you're sharing your section, your male colleague jumps in and shares the next point, and then gets the credit, gets the opportunity to go share that to the client or to the board or that next phase of that process.

And we had a male executive go through that scenario, and he was moved in the moment when we came back and debriefed that immersive experience. And we actually heard from him later. And what he said was that not only has he stopped interrupting his colleagues in work, he stopped interrupting his kids at home. He realized that he was just interrupting people all the time, and being in this perspective of this woman at work made him realize that, one, he felt what it's like to be interrupted, to be so outraged that someone would get credit and not them. But then also that he's doing this in all aspects of his life.

And that, to me, was quite powerful because who we are at work is who we are in our lives, and if we can transform that, if we can help build those, that empathy, awareness and also the skills to engage across difference, that that will permeate beyond the rounds of the workplace.

Dwayne Betts:

I got to tell you, you are really committed to this. I can hear it in your voice, and you're so passionate about it, that it's making it seem way easier than it is. I'm actually interested in how it gets achieved in the VR space. When I put these headsets on and I go into this situation that you created, is it just a situation that's driven by the images that I see and the sounds that I hear? What happens when I put those headsets on?

Elise Smith:

Yeah, it's a great question. And so for our learners in the headsets, and quite frankly for our learners who are on a web browser and in their office going through our training, you are self-directing your learning. So you might get a phone call, you got to answer that phone. You got an email? Read your email. Oh, and you're in a meeting? You're going to have to speak out loud. You're at a social event after work okay, engage with your colleague. It's truly the self-directed experience where-

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, hold up. Do people engage back though?

Elise Smith:

... Right now, it's branching functionality. So you may have a different experience than your colleague, Dwayne. If you were to go through it and someone on your team were to go through, you might make different decisions that have different outcomes, but it's not going to be completely generated based off of what you do. There is a storyline that we want to go through because there's skills, there's lessons we want to impart to each of our learners in each experience.

Dwayne Betts:

This sounds like an interactive video game that is really intentionally driven to help you think about things that could be teased out later.

Elise Smith:

Absolutely. And it's about practice. It's about actually in the video environment, or in the video game "environment", and I'm doing air quotes. You actually get to practice how you might engage maybe differently than what you would have otherwise. Maybe you get to practice being that bystander, or maybe you get to practice repairing or apologizing after you've made a mistake in a way that you hadn't typically done so.

Dwayne Betts:

What's interesting, listening to you talk about this, you see how directly practical it is, and I'm hearing some of the places that you came at this work from. But it sounds so much like you're talking about poetry, this idea of equipping people with the opportunity to wear the skin of somebody else. This opportunity, because it's not just, "Let me tell you, you're this person." It's like, "Let me have you

experience a story as they would've experienced it." Which is something that I think that we get from fiction, and it's something that we get from poetry, and that value of it I find to be really important.

But what it makes me wonder though, because one of the things I found out when I was doing a little bit of research on you, is it was like, "Praxis Labs announced that it raised \$3.2 million in venture capital." And I wanted to talk about that part of how you conceptualize this work that you're doing. It is clearly work that benefits the community. You have support from a wide range of folks, but what led you to pursue support from VC, and what does that actually mean for your capacity?

I always think about it as a question of scale and what does it take to do the R&D to really prove that a thing can work, and then what does it take to have the resources to build a team out that could actually have you do the thing that you plan on doing? But it's interesting, because a lot of times I'm talking to people who live only in a nonprofit space, and so I want to ask you about it mostly because it means that you sold your ideas to people who just believe in the wellbeing of the world and people who believe in the wellbeing of their pockets. So, I wonder what has that experience been like?

Elise Smith:

I think, as someone who doesn't come from, there's no way that I could self-fund the R&D investment that we had at Praxis. I think, even before you go to venture capital, people are like, "Well, just raise a friends and family round." And I'm like, "Huh. What friends and family do you all have, and could I raise from them, your friends, your family?"

Dwayne Betts:

Right.

Elise Smith:

But I think, even that was elusive. Angel investors was elusive. People... I had the privilege of going to grad school and people in my grad school class and my MBA class were like, "Oh, go meet with this angel investor. I sat down with them, had an idea, and they just wrote me a check for 25,000, \$50,000." I was like, "Wow, this is easy." I met with that same investor, I had traction, I had revenue, and they were like, "This is a great idea. I want to connect you with an entrepreneur in Africa who's doing this really interesting thing in agriculture."

Dwayne Betts:

I'm sorry.

Elise Smith:

And I was like, "How is that related? Other than we might be the only Black people you've talked to all month."

Dwayne Betts:

Yo. What's interesting too though is it's directly connected to your work, because one of the questions that, how frustrating is that for you? It feels like you might walk into all of these conversations and aren't just asking based on issues of bias and racism in America and the world, would I be treated differently if I look different? You are also asking those questions based on the fact that your work suggests that you radically would be treated differently.

It's like, how do you keep going? Because that has to be deeply, deeply frustrating, particularly somebody like you who is doing work that, I mean, it could literally revolutionize the way that we think about training people for empathy. I wonder what kind of frustration do you deal with when you want to do this thing that is deeply needed and important and significant, and yet, I imagine, you just run into walls sometimes. How do you keep from being overwhelmed by the ways in which you see the prejudice of the world differently from the rest of us?

Elise Smith:

It's interesting because I think, as a Black woman in America, this is a daily experience. It is a learned behavior to keep going because you must, because of all of the things you've already encountered and had to overcome. So it's funny, I left that coffee date with that angel investor and I don't even know if I was mad so much as I just found it so funny. I was like, "That is hysterical."

And also, isn't going to stop me because just like all of the other things and all of the other moments and with colleagues and peers that I've had to overcome, that didn't stop me. This isn't either, and there's another way, and that is what led me to VC. I realized that, okay, maybe I'll go get money from funds that are firms, they have a process. And I think, the biggest thing for me though is in fundraising, and we've now raised over \$20 million for what we're doing at Praxis, it's really, I think what's been-

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, stop. I'm sorry. We should just go ahead and make sure that we clearly understand what that means. When you say, "We have raised over \$20 million," because this is not a statement I hear. In fact, I know that when that first angel investor hears about what you've done, it's almost, your progress is almost like a opportunity for him to metaphorically slip the VR lens on and rethink his past decision. But congratulations, \$20 million is a lot, particularly for something that is predicated on making out actions with each other better. That is really impressive, and I know I don't have to tell you that you should be proud, but that is really exceptional.

Elise Smith:

... Well, I really appreciate that and it means a lot. And I think, there's been a lot of, there are so many stories about women of color founders and how much they raise, people of color and how much they raise, and breaking barriers, and, "You're the first to raise this much, and we've only had a hundred to raise that much." And I think, all of those stories are powerful because they give a model for someone who's coming up and wants to do that same, wants to raise VC money as well. But I think, personally, I've just become so wary of those stories, of that narrative, because I want to talk about our impact, to your point. I want to talk about what we did with the capital and what we're doing with our clients, what we're doing with our learners, the difference we're making in their daily lives and their workplaces.

And I don't want to talk about the barriers I've had to overcome because that's all I'm asked to talk about. Whereas the folks who are, who don't share my intersectional identity, who aren't the 1st or the 10th or the 100th person to do something, they're just being asked about their clients, they're asked about use cases, and that helps them grow their businesses in ways that asking about the discrimination I've overcome does not. And I think, I've started just turning down opportunities to be in stories about that because it's just, it's not the narrative that I want, to be the only narrative that I get to talk to.

Dwayne Betts:

It is a dilemma because you get to this point where you recognize that your story stops belonging to you. And I think that you do the reverse with your work. You try to take a singular to get to the

universal. The problem is, when people hear a story like yours, they want to take your story, the singular-

Elise Smith:

Yeah.

Dwayne Betts:

... and they want to make it universal. And so, the way that we tell it is we need to hear the narrative of you overcoming, because we need to believe that you overcame. I actually do get the point though, that it's this other thing that you want to tell us about, what overcoming actually mean. And so for you, all of the stuff that you went through to get to this place that you are now, but where are you going then? I get it. You are really, really happy talking about the work, right? So, where are you going?

Elise Smith:

My hope is that we achieve our mission, that we actually help people think differently about people who are different than themselves, and think in a way that allows them to see their humanity and have compassion for those experiences that they might not be familiar with. My hope is that we actually help people in their jobs act differently so that their teams can work better together, so that everyone can advance and their ideas can be heard, so that they can make products and services that actually serve everyone and not just the folks who have typically been in power, predominantly White men in these corporate workplaces.

But it's also that, when I walk into a retail store or a hotel, I'm not discriminated against my race because somebody in that workplace had went through a Praxis Labs training and has had to think about what it's like to be a Black person, and to be like, "Oh, I'm sorry sir, this may not be the story you meant to walk into," or that's a kind way of responding to someone in a workplace. And we know, we've read and seen and experienced what it actually can feel like in that role. And my hope is that we change that, and that we change the experience of what humanity looks like in workplaces, and that changes what our society feels like overall. And that is a big broad, lofty goal, but that's my hope.

Dwayne Betts:

When we come back, we'll hear more of Elise's story, how she got from the suburbs of Chicago to working on artificial intelligence at IBM, to the virtual reality experience that set her on her current path. Where'd you grow up?

Elise Smith:

I grew up in a southern suburb of Chicago.

Dwayne Betts:

So how'd you get from Chicago to... What did you... When you went to college, what were you planning on doing? Were you a first generation college student? Do you have 10 PhDs in your background? How was that?

Elise Smith:

Yeah, I wasn't a first generation college student. My dad has got a MBA from Northwestern, but I did feel wildly different and unprepared, and I actually did a lot of work with first gen students at Dartmouth

because I had so much access and privilege and I still couldn't navigate or figure it out. I think for me, undergrad was this wide awakening of, that I grew up in this microcosm of the world where I knew people who went to private islands, but I also knew people who were growing up paycheck to paycheck and who weren't always making all their rent payments in their homes. And I think, what's different about that experience is, and it was a highly diverse school, there are a lot of Black people and there are a lot of White people. It was like 50/50. And that is just not-

Dwayne Betts:

You mean at your high school or Dartmouth?

Elise Smith:

... In my high school.

Dwayne Betts:

Right.

Elise Smith:

In my high school, it was half Black, half White.

Dwayne Betts:

100% that comment. Yeah.

Elise Smith:

And there were folks, like I said, they were going on vacation to islands, and others who were barely making their ends meet. And I think that experience was so unique that when I got to Dartmouth, I realized how unique that was, that I actually had broad exposure to a wide swath of ways that people lived. And most people at Dartmouth came from their own, from one of those worlds, and I had exposure to all of them.

Dwayne Betts:

I always tell people that your experiences is just your experiences, but the reason why we go to books, the reason why we need your tech is because you can't experience enough things. The year you started is you and your co-founder, how do you go from the first idea? What is the first idea? Was VR always the idea, or did VR becoming the way that you were able to fully fulfill this intention, this dream that you had?

Elise Smith:

It's funny, I think sometimes when you look back, all the dots connect, but when you're in the moment and you look forward, it just is a series of dots all out in the world. And that's kind of how I feel about the path to immersive experiences. I think, it really is a combination of both my lived experiences, the stories of my parents and their fight for educational equity, paired with my work experiences. I got to build some of the first generation of Watson for Education products. And so, I was thinking about-

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, what is that?

Elise Smith:

... So we were, at Watson, IBM Watson, we were thinking about how to use machine learning to both personalize and measure learning experiences. We were thinking-

Dwayne Betts:

Oh, so you were born with a computer. So you actually the tech person, because this is [inaudible 00:24:26].

Elise Smith:

... Well, I didn't start in tech. I think, maybe I should have gone back further. In undergrad, I was in a research lab thinking about how socioeconomic status impacts learning, and how do you, what intervention could reduce cortisol or stress levels in young people's brains and help them increase working memory so they could outperform with their peers? And so, really started with this passion for hypothesis testing and intervention. And then what does that really mean for real people and real organizations in real lives?

Well, I was also an undergrad, I was working in the Office of Institutional Diversity and Equity in the middle of New Hampshire, in a predominantly White state. And so, we were thinking about, how do we recruit faculty and staff of color to New Hampshire, to Dartmouth College? And it was the duality of research, intervention, hypothesis testing, with how do you create spaces in places that see everyone, hear them, get their perspectives included, and help them advance, grow, and have real impact? How do you recruit and retain?

Dwayne Betts:

So where did tech come in that? Because now, I see it, you building all of these skills, and actually, you're noticing all of these problems.

Elise Smith:

I think the idea of scale is what brought me to technology. How do you drive real impact at scale? It's why I joined IBM, it's why I was excited about what they were doing with this thing called Watson at the time. I just geeked out while working on Watson for education products because I saw the opportunity for technology to meet learners where they were at and move them along on a journey.

Dwayne Betts:

But wait, hold on. Watson?

Elise Smith:

It didn't stop there.

Dwayne Betts:

Are you talking about about the AI Watson thing?

Elise Smith:

Yes, yes.

Dwayne Betts:

The artificial intelligence?

Elise Smith:

Yes.

Dwayne Betts:

Hold up, hold, hold. So you telling me you created ChatGPT?

Elise Smith:

Listen, if I did, Dwayne, I would be doing something. I would be off on an island somewhere. I did not create that, but I-

Dwayne Betts:

Okay.

Elise Smith:

... definitely did have early exposure to emerging technology in a way that, when I got exposed to virtual reality, I wasn't uncomfortable because I had been in an environment where we were on the kind of the early phase of what AI could be.

Dwayne Betts:

So basically, you got exposed to VR and was able to imagine how you could adapt VR to the problem that you really, that you and your co-founder thought were really important.

Elise Smith:

Absolutely. And I got connected with a research lab out of Stanford that was, I had the opportunity to go through a research experience where I took the perspective of a Black boy at the hands of the police, just viscerally and emotionally moving, and inspiring in a way because I went on this journey for empathy building in VR through perspective taking. I crossed the US Mexico border in search of economic and security, and just moving experiences that I saw the power of building empathy. And I saw the opportunity to use immersive to not just build empathy, but to have folks actually practice behaviors, and to be able to give them feedback, and to be able to see trends at the aggregate, and to help people in a safe space do the things they want to do already, which is become someone who can work across different, someone who creates real connection beyond transactional trust, and who is able to work in this modern, diverse, often global workforce.

Dwayne Betts:

So, this podcast is called Almost There, and I like to ask our guests, what do you think about when you hear that phrase, "Almost there"?

Elise Smith:

Yeah, it's such a, it is poetry in many ways. It's a poetic, to me, a poetic statement about the progress that is yet to be made. It is the fact that we have started, that we see that we can, that finish line, that

promised land, and that we just have to keep going. Whether it's overcoming barriers, whether it's just putting one foot in front of the other, it's, we have more to do, and yet, we see how far we've come.

Dwayne Betts:

I actually think it's interesting because I was going to ask you, if you could talk to somebody and you could ask somebody, a columnist for advice around your work, somebody who you've just decided that this columnist has the answer to any question that you might ask around your work, what is the one question that you would ask the columnist?

Elise Smith:

Wow, that's a really good question. I think a question that's been weighing on me and heavy on me is how do you, how do I, as someone who doesn't fundamentally believe the systems and structures that are currently in place for a VC-backed startup, live the values that I hold personally? How do I run a company within these systems and structures and not have cognitive dissonance? And to do it in a way that, acknowledges that we're in White supremacist structures, we're in capitalist systems, all of which are not necessarily, they are made to not produce equitable outcomes. So how do you then run a company in those systems that's trying to make equitable outcomes? Can you dismantle the master's tools within the master's house?

Dwayne Betts:

Yeah. Well, I think being able to quote Audre Lorde is always a good first step. Yeah. And, yeah, and I'm not the columnist to answer that question. I will say though, maybe I, I actually kind of resist the hypo, even from Lorde, the master's tools, because who gets to make that designation? One of the ultimate problems have always been the rejection. Like [inaudible 00:30:09] are the master's tools or the master scraps, but who gets to make that declaration of what that thing is for me and for my community? And so capitalism, in some real way, might be the master's tools, but who gets to make that assertion? I think that we have, maybe over the past five years, maybe over the past decade, have become obsessed over the naming of a thing in a way, as if the naming of it makes it less just or more just. And so, I don't know, I think that we are reinventing these tools.

Somebody else who wasn't at Watson when you were at Watson, who didn't know you existed at Watson, would've said that IBM can never be the source of something that's going to lead us towards a new future. That's where you're going for your change? And that person would just not have been aware of you, and that person would've been making a mistake. So, I would argue that we are not operating in a master's house, we are not dismantling the master's house. It's like Cornelius Eady said, "I am building a house around your house, brick by brick." And the poem is called Gratitude. But it is like, I think we could reject the assumption that the thing that we're building is as interwoven with the worst parts of the things that we know as sometimes we suggest to each other.

Elise Smith:

I, Dwayne, I'm going to take that. Maybe you were the columnist I needed to ask. Thank you.

Dwayne Betts:

Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Newsom at Magnificent Noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Eleanor Kagan, Paul Schneider and Kristen Mueller, along with Patrick Darcy, Alex Simon and Amy Lowe from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliot. I'm Reginold Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.

