

From Consultant to Tutor: Learning by doing

[00:00:00] **Elyse:** So I know you started your career in strategy consulting. Can you just give us an overview of what you did before you got into the education space and what attracted you to strategy consulting?

Jemma: I did my undergrad in biochemistry Oxford, and it's one of those courses where you run straight to a master's. So I found myself in my fourth year of university working in the lab, and having done some work experience in, for example, Proctor and gamble and realizing I didn't want to work in a lab anymore.

But that was everything that my degree had compelled me towards. And I pitched strategy consultancy because, in honesty because it had a good pay. And because Oxford, we get a lot of interest from strategy consultancy companies. And I went well, that's something that I think I could probably do. It's something [00:01:00] where you get to work with lots of different companies.

And you get to problem solve, which is the bit of biochemistry that I realized I really enjoyed. And I was lucky enough to get a place with a small strategy consultancy.

Elyse: And how did you realize that this wasn't really working for you? You said on the biochemistry space that you didn't really want to work in a lab, but when you were in strategy, I imagine you did a bunch of different things as well.

When did you realize that it was not really satisfactory for you?

Jemma: About four days after I started the job.

Yeah. So in strategy it's a very it's quite cutthroat. And there's quite a lot of pressure, especially as a young analyst. So they sat us down on the first day and they were really honest with us. And they said that some of you will leave before the end of this year.

Some of you will stay with us for three years, maybe some five, and some of you will make it to partner. And probably about four days in, I realized I don't think this is what I want to do, but at the same time, I'd [00:02:00] moved to London. I'd moved to this big city, told everybody this is what I was going to do.

They'd given us a signing on bonus for the year. And so even though I thought it was probably not my thing, I thought I'm going to throw myself into it and see how it goes. But that doubt was probably there from about the fourth day.

Elyse: And what was it, what was it that made you have that doubt?

Jemma: I am I'm dyslexic. And I discovered that during university and it was something that I knew. I knew I couldn't really write very good essays. Which ironically biochemistry is a fully essay based subject at Oxford. Didn't realize that until I went. But I'd realized that the types of things that I was very good at was that problem solving, talking things through presenting and working out the central problem.

Which is great when you're about three years into being a consultant. Because when you start at the [00:03:00] bottom, your analytical guys, they make the PowerPoints that you show clients. And one of the disadvantages of my dyslexia and the way that my brain works is I really struggled to see tiny mistakes.

And one of the big things that they were focusing on was making sure that everything was the right color, making sure that everything was the right size so that the client wasn't put off the message by going on this, this slide looks a bit untidy. So there were bits of it that I really liked. There was a lot of, there was a lot of looking at large sets of data.

I enjoyed that, but I realized that the PowerPoint writing was really hard for me. And I looked at the other guys who joined with me. There was four of us who'd started and they seem to find the PowerPoints so much easier.

And I just couldn't see the mistakes in it. And I knew that that was something that was going to hold me back because I could see people who were a couple of years on from me and they were [00:04:00] still doing that task. And I knew that that task was going to be a problem.

If there was a way to shoot past the first couple of years, I would have loved it.

But the first couple of years was unfortunately where I was stuck. And I couldn't see how I could get past that bit.

Elyse: Yeah. Yeah. And I feel like, honestly, that's not the only career where people want to kind of skip the first few years.

It's a different skill set at the lower level versus a few years into it. So how did you then decide that you wanted to go into the education space? And what was the process for you when you were at this consulting job, you were dissatisfied, you were sort of like, I'm just going to stick it out.

But when did you start thinking about making a career change?

Jemma: So I, when I was at Oxford, I worked with the access team. And their access team help to encourage students from disadvantaged backgrounds to apply to Oxford. And [00:05:00] I come from two parents who left school at 14 and 16. I was the first in my family to go.

So it was something that appealed to me when I was doing some voluntary stuff in university. And because of that, I ended up doing some paid consultancy, some paid advice for the people who were looking to go into Oxford, but I thought this is something that I'm quite good at explaining.

So maybe tutoring is something I'd be interested in. And I looked up essentially, what was London's top tutoring agency. And I went on the weekend and I applied to them. I went down and I did an interview and this was, again, it was only a few weeks into me living in London and doing consultancy.

But I thought, well, I mean, consultancies it's a very long hour job, but I was like, well, I can probably still do a bit of tutoring on the side. And so I went down, I was interviewed and they liked what [00:06:00] I'd done and they accepted me. And I think it was February, maybe Easter time. I was working with a student down near Canary Wharf and she was a first year biomedical student.

And I'd worked with her over the long weekends. And I loved it. I thought it was great. I loved the freedom of being able to do things the way that I wanted to do it. I could see her progressing and I came back to work on the Tuesday, I remember coming in early and I met with someone who was three years, my senior in the role.

And I'd asked him how his weekend had been. And he'd basically been at the office the entire time. And it was that moment that I remember being, I don't want to do this. I know that that will be me in three years. And I know that that is not something I'll be able to sustain. The fact that he was coming in on the highlight of his [00:07:00] weekend was that he'd watched a football match on TV.

And I was thinking I've just done for four days of what most people would class as work, but I loved it. And I can think of so many moments when I was having really great fun. And you were sitting here in the office and I knew at that point, that was the point that I went, I can't do this any longer.

Elyse: So I think there's a couple of things there. I think that there's that moment that people have where you look up in your organization or you have a conversation with somebody like this guy, and you just think looking up, this is not who I want to be. I don't see myself here and I don't, it's just not for you. And that's okay. But I think that having that realization is really powerful and looking up in your organization and figuring out that, oh, I don't want to be any of those people.

That's a really powerful thing. And then, even though you spent the whole weekend working, you were having so much fun and it was something that really resonated with [00:08:00] you. And so, how long did that go on for and, when did you decide, I really want to do this full-time?

Jemma: Well, it should have been then, but I took a bit of a roundabout route to get there because I wasn't confident that I could make it as a full-time tutor because it's not something you often hear about.

People doing it full-time I think nowadays maybe a bit more, quite a lot of people after the pandemic have looked at tutoring, but when I was first starting out, it wasn't seen as a full-time job and it certainly wasn't a graduate job. And all of my university friends that all started on grad schemes and they were all working in these big corporate offices and I was working in a corporate office and I was hating it. And I remember when only when I left the consultancy, I did so, and I moved back to Oxford, which was [00:09:00] where I studied and also where my partner lived. And he said, just come back to Oxford and we'll figure it out. And I came back and I took on a role, which was, it was kind of tutoring. It was educational. But it was working originally for summer school in Oxford and, and teaching for them. And

then at the end of that, they said to me, would you like to write a course and a medicine course? So I'd done a lot of biomed and I'd done a lot of biochemistry and they could see that I had that subject knowledge and they could see that I needed work.

So they said, well, you wrote this three month course that we're running. And the day I went to hand in what I'd done, the guy who was running the center had announced that he was leaving and they literally turned to me and said, will you run it? And I said, yes. So I should have done full-time tutoring when I left consultancy, but I didn't.

Instead I went this roundabout way. And I ended up, I worked at this there was a summer school, [00:10:00] but they'd set up this year long program. So I worked at this year long program for two and a half, three years getting it up, getting it running. And I learned so much doing that. I wouldn't go back and go straight into tutoring now, but it was still something that put a little bit of time on the journey.

But it was something that was really, really beneficial to me.

Elyse: How long were you at the consultancy before you left to move back to Oxford?

Jemma: Nine months.

Elyse: So then you moved back to Oxford and you started running this center for a couple of years. And it wasn't exactly tutoring, but it was still more along the lines of what you wanted to be doing.

Jemma: Moving towards what I wanted to be doing. And I was still tutoring all the time. So I had finished working at the study center and I lived there as well. So I would finish working, but still be living on site. And then I would be doing tutoring and I would be doing some of it online. I'd be driving and doing some face to [00:11:00] face.

So the tuition ramped up over the next couple of years with that. Eventually it got to the point where we had 30 students coming in per term for the study school. And I had a mentor at that point and she was running the summer school.

So we lived together and I remember her saying to me, if you want to do this type of thing, you need to qualify as a teacher. I was thinking, well, do I want to do that or do I want to do tutoring? But either way qualify as a teacher made a lot of sense. And it happened to be that I left that job.

And I also took on my first residential tutoring role. So I left that job and the next day I flew to Dubai to start a short term tutoring role out there. But I also upon my return then trained as a teacher. So it was all this kind of poles merging from a very corporate and very corporate ladder to something that was a little bit more fluid, a little bit more me taking my own path.

[00:12:00] **Elyse:** Yeah, but in order to do that, you did have to take the jump and leave the strategy job. And it sounds like when you left you moved back to Oxford, but you didn't necessarily have a plan. It sounds like it was, just come back and we'll figure it out, right?

Jemma: And I live with my partner and his mum.

Elyse: So I imagine that must've been kind of scary. What did you think about that? And how did you cope with that?

Jemma: It was the thing that people didn't do. Everyone who I knew had finished university and had gone and got themselves a grad job and they were working up the ladder.

And so for me, stepping off that ladder was really scary. And that's probably the reason I went straight back into running the year-round center was because the first time that I jumped off the ladder, I suppose, it felt too odd. And I felt I can't do this. It felt like I was on my own. And [00:13:00] everyone around me was doing this very structured, working their way up.

And it didn't seem like there was anyone like me who had turned around and said, oh, this isn't for me. So I did feel like I was the only one doing it. So that was definitely a source of worry for me because it was unusual. I think that's the thing.

And no one had explained during university or school or anything that is perfectly fine to have these periods in your career that aren't just very step-by-step. And my parents were actually self-employed. My dad's a builder. Mom's a cleaner. They're self-employed so they don't have that structure. So when I was in that structure, I felt like, oh, I'm doing really well. And building my way up, climbing the greasy pole, but the moment you step off of it, there's nothing. And so that was really disconcerting.

Elyse: Yeah, it definitely is. It's inspiring I think for people to hear that it's okay to feel weird about taking [00:14:00] that leap. Because it's super disconcerting, and you even grew up in a situation where your parents were self-employed and didn't necessarily have that structure, but even so it's very difficult to go a different way than society kind of expects you to go, or that tells you is the right way to go.

Jemma: Everybody had I'd met, because of the university I went to, oh, you must be doing something in the city outside. No, I'm not. What am I doing? I must be doing something wrong. It's just that the expectation and the expectation was yeah. I felt it.

Elyse: It's hard, not only because it's outside of expectations, but also because I imagine, you went from a consulting salary to taking some downtime. And then you have also that financial instability.

Jemma: Definitely. I went from university to living on my own in London. To [00:15:00] living with my boyfriend's mom which didn't feel great. And did feel a little bit like a failure at the start.

Elyse: So you worked at this year round center for a couple of years. And what was the moment where you said, I want to be a full-time tutor. I'm going to go do that.

Jemma: I flew out to Dubai halfway through my teacher training year for a client over Easter. And the moment that I left the teacher training year, I flew to California. So a lot of my tutoring is abroad. I work with families abroad who are looking to come to the UK to school or to university.

And. I absolutely love it. And it was something I just kept returning to. I thought if I can't do it full time, then I'll find something else. But this is the thing that I enjoy doing.

So I'm going to try and make a go of it.

Elyse: So you left the center. You decided to go into this full time. What was the beginning of that? It sounds like [00:16:00] you kind of had built up a little bit of a client base, so was it a smooth transition for you or did you have any sort of bumps in the road?

Jemma: I think by that point, I'd ironed out the bumps, because I'd always done it alongside another job. But there was definitely a point, because until that point I'd been employed, but with self-employed income coming in. So there was a point where I turned around and as I left the teacher training year, I was completely financially unsupported.

I didn't have a regular paycheck coming in. So it was, for the first year and actually probably for the first couple of years, that I've done this, I went absolutely 60 hours a week as many hours as I could possibly work, because I was really worried that at some point, there were going to be these clients who said no, and touch wood, it's not happened yet, but there was this worry that just seemed to be ingrained. And, and I struggled with it. Even now. I struggle with saying no to work, even though I know I've got enough. [00:17:00] And part of it's the students, but part of it is also financially related.

That's definitely something that I've had to work on. As I've started to sell the business. They need me more on the business side and less in the actual teaching side. But I still feel like, oh, if I don't take this client on, no one's ever going to want me again. So there is definitely that balance that I feel at the moment.

Elyse: Yeah, I think that's a pretty common symptom. I feel like I've heard from a lot of people who have kind of gone off and started their own businesses or started their own endeavors is the sense that you're sort of jumping off a cliff financially or that the bottom is going to fall out from under you.

And that's a hard thing to navigate, and you really, I think have to be intentional about what constitutes enough for you.

Jemma: And yeah, I've definitely taken on too much at points. [00:18:00] So I definitely have, yeah, I've been working at 2:00 AM at some point teaching because someone asked me to.

And I've always said yes, because I've always been worried. It's only been in the last probably last three to six months where I've turned around and said no, because being self-employed you do have that worry that suddenly you're going to wake up one day and there's not going to be any jobs coming in and there's not going to be any clients that want to work with you.

And something would have happened and you won't be able to put it right. And that is something that you don't get in a business as such, when you're working in a company there's always a company structure. There's always the HR person you can go to, but in self-employed or running your own business, you are that person.

So it is a, it's a really hard one to navigate.

Elyse: Do you think it's like an imposter syndrome kind of thing? I don't know if you felt that way where you know that they're gonna all of a sudden realize that you're not qualified.

[00:19:00] **Jemma:** Yes. Yes. And there's part of the reason I qualified as a teacher was, was to try and stop that.

That's been with me since I was at university, so I went to Oxford university. It's one of the most well-known universities in the UK. And I came from family that had never been, and it felt like I didn't belong there. And then I was diagnosed as dyslexic and it was like, well, should I really be here?

And then when I got the strategy consultancy, again, it's considered a really, really prestigious kind of career. And I was in it and I was really not enjoying it. I thought maybe there's something wrong with me. So each time I do feel like that's been a common thread throughout.

And even running my own business, when I started the education hotel. I didn't want to put myself forward for it. My partner pushed me to do it because he said, look, it's something you've always wanted to do. But [00:20:00] there is definitely a feeling, a feeling that you shouldn't be there or sometimes someone's just going to find out that there's something to do with you.

There's no reason to feel that way, but it is definitely an irrational fear.

Elyse: Yeah. But it's one of those things that it's just a process, and it's something that we always have to just to remind ourselves, I am qualified for this. I have done this.

All these people wouldn't be paying me if they didn't think I was qualified. At least that's what I have to tell myself. Yeah.

Jemma: Yeah. And you haven't got the bag over the company. When I was consulting... in a way I'm doing a similar thing now. I am going, and problem solving, not for big companies, but for families I'm problem-solving whether children should go or what their children should pick.

I just don't have the backing of a big company. So it's me at the front. And that's partly what I wanted when I started consultancy was to be the person doing the presentations and to be the person working with the client.

But it also means the buck stops [00:21:00] with you. So you can't have that responsibility to a company, you've got that responsibility to you. So I think where I've ended up and where I started are quite similar, but they're obviously different industries and one of them is a big company.

And obviously I want a small company, but they all have similar themes in them.

Elyse: What did people think when you decided to go off and start this company? It sounds like your partner was very supportive and really helped encourage you, but what did your family think?

What did your friends and peers think? All those people you knew who had gone off and worked corporate jobs, what do people think about that?

Jemma: So, so Josh, my partner is really supportive. He works with me as well in the business. He does a little bits that I'm not good at. So all the tech but everyone, yeah, it's an odd one.

I think peers is something I've noticed. My family again because my parents are [00:22:00] self-employed and they they've always said you've got an Oxford degree to fall back on.

But my peers, they don't necessarily understand that. I think my close friends get why I do it. But a lot of other people, when you go to college reunion or school reunion, or when I see someone and I've not seen them for a while and they asked me what I'm doing and I say, well, I run this company. They kind of look at it. You're like, okay. And they'll say, oh my, my sister tutored for a little bit. Now she does this. So it's a job that a lot of people do as a stop gap. It's not a career for a lot of people. The idea of being a career tutor is still quite foreign for people to understand.

So there is a bit of a lack of understanding and it's also harder in that I'm probably the only person I know of my age, who runs a company. And [00:23:00] when I sit down and I discuss with friends and acquaintances as well, and I say, I've got a team of five that work with me.

And I'll always say with me as opposed to, for me, because I wanted to be as collaborative as possible, obviously, but also when I'm talking to friends, it seems odd that I'm saying well they are the people I employ. And a lot of my friends, they work typical nine to five jobs.

It's just very unusual to them.

So I don't necessarily talk a lot about the business to friends and acquaintances, just because it's very different to what they do.

Elyse: But have you been able to find a community of tutors or education space, business owners who you can kind of talk to about this?

Jemma: Yes. So there's a very active Facebook community of tutors and a lot of those are full-time tutors, so it was great for me. Cause I [00:24:00] work with families. I often advise families and in running the education hotel, I have a team of 60 tutors who work for me. But a lot of those are part-time.

Often they have another job and it's something they're doing as a stop gap, or they want to be an actor. And so it's something that is their regular job.

I'd say COVID really increased the amount of visibility that I have to full-time tutors. Because everyone's gone online. And instead of the individual tutor being well-known in that area, now everyone's online and everyone can talk to each other online.

And so I definitely found it a lot nicer to be able to chat to other tutors who are doing similar things to me or other business owners who are doing similar things and to be able to discuss with them without worrying that they're going to undercut you because that happens quite a [00:25:00] bit. So it's been really nice to be able to talk with these, with these individuals, which is really interesting because a lot of them have kind of similar stories to mine.

They started out in a very corporate world and then they realized that tuition was something they wanted to do. And then they started tuition business. And some of them are further along and some of them are less further along than I am.

Elyse: Yeah, absolutely. Do you find that... and this is just out of curiosity, but do you find that the pandemic has had an effect on your business? I feel like I've read so much about the pandemic's effect on like higher education. I'm just curious how has this changed for you during the pandemic?

Jemma: My business doubled. During the pandemic. Yeah, because so many people started online learning. We were really new. The education hotel had only been running, I think, six months when COVID dropped actually less than that. But we doubled, we've doubled in team size and we've doubled in students size [00:26:00] because there's more demand for online learning.

I think it's been an interesting time for education. There's also been a lot of people who've been swapping schools because the pandemics really revealed what some schools can do and what some schools can't do for education. So it's been a really interesting time and it was a really interesting time to be running my first kind of full year of business as opposed to just doing it on my own, I had a team, I had tutors and yeah, it was really positive for us.

It was interesting to see, and it's still interesting to see the shape of education changing as well. So in the UK, we've had a GCSE and A Levels are our big exams, have been canceled which normally would mean a decrease in the level of work that I do, especially because I do a lot of exam tuition.

But actually what I found is is those people who are now looking at other skills that their children should be having. So study skills has become [00:27:00] really big and important and self-directed learning. And it's really interesting to see the way that parents are viewing education changing as well.

Elyse: Yeah, that is absolutely. That's really fascinating. I mean, I work at a university here in the U S and it's been really fascinating just to see and read about all of the different ways that, you know, higher ed has been affected by this. And just how people are viewing it.

Jemma: When, when I was in school, your job was your thing. So you were working towards a job and a university course. And you did a university course, and then you went to your job and then you stayed there. So it was really odd for me to say, after those nine months that I spent in strategy consulting, this isn't for me, because I'd been taught you do your job and you do your job, and then you move up that ladder and you keep doing your job.

I hadn't been taught [00:28:00] that you can change job. It's probably fine too. You can change career, you can start your own. And so that normalization is something I'm really hoping comes into schools. And I'm really hoping that they changed the way that especially our careers services is taught because we really do focus on this is the one thing that you should be.

There's so many different ways to run a career. There's so many different ways to live your life as well. Lots of my students that are taking years out or their parents are taking years out and they're going world- schooling, they're going around the world, they're traveling, they are learning lots about new cultures and they are able to do that because their parents work online or because their parents have found themselves in a financial situation that means that they can do that. But that's not something that we are exposing children to. Instead what we're saying is you should become a plumber or [00:29:00] you should be an office typist. You know, we were stuck in that idea which is something that I'm passionate about because when I went through it, it seemed... I felt really out of place when I quit the first job, I felt like I shouldn't have done it. I felt like it was something I was going to really regret and it's worked out great. And even if I hadn't, I would have found something else.

I still would've found a different way. But that initial fear and that initial kind of feeling out of place, I think lots of people must feel it because it's something that from an early age, we're conditioned that they said there is one job for you.

Elyse: Yeah. We have to normalize career pivots . And career breaks and all the different kinds of activities and aspects that make up somebody's life and career . That's why I started this podcast, is to just share these [00:30:00] stories so that it becomes a little more normal for people because it shouldn't take so much bravery and courage and mental toughness to say, this isn't what I want to do.

You should be able to freely make that choice.

Jemma: And you shouldn't be defined by your career either. There are people I know who feel like that is the person they are, because that is the job that they do. And they're nothing else. And I think that's a problem.

Elyse: That's super interesting. Is there anything that you wish you had done differently in your career change?

Jemma: Each step taught me something. So, no, I still wish I'd done all the things that I'd done because every twist and turn has helped me to realize that I can do what I like. And also I can run a successful business. I wish that really back when I started that strategy consultancy.

I wish I hadn't felt like I had to stay [00:31:00] so long. And I suppose in some ways as well for the summer school, but a little bit less. Cause I had a little bit more courage at that point, but I wish I had jumped a little bit earlier because I maybe would have ended up at this position a little bit earlier, or I may have done something more interesting in between. And again, that comes back to education because I wish someone had told me that it would have been fine to do it.

Because then I wouldn't have felt so worried about making that first jump.

Elyse: Yeah. That's fair. So what advice do you have for somebody who's looking to make a career change?

Jemma: You can always go back. My biggest worry with anything that I did was that I was shutting the door, but there is always a way back. So even if you change career and you realize it's wrong and you realize that actually you should have been doing the original thing, don't burn the bridge, but you'll be able to go back.

Elyse: Yeah. And I've said that a number of times on this show too, is that you really [00:32:00] can, you can always go back .

You've spent a long time building up this one particular skillset. And so there's no reason to be nervous that you can't go back as long as you have those relationships and you know, there's a path there. Yeah, you can definitely always go back and hopefully like you said, it takes out some of the fear of making a little bit of a jump that knowing that you have a safety net to fall back on.

So I think that's great advice. And my last question for you is what is your definition of success?

Jemma: Okay. My definition of success, it's going to sound really cheesy as well. Getting up and enjoying it because I'm sure lots of people say this, but I get up each day and I might not like getting up at 7:00 AM to teach, or I might not like one of the topics that I'm teaching or I [00:33:00] might not really want to tutor at 8pm whilst everyone else's having dinner or something, but I like my day. Overall, there are little tiny bits that I don't, but on the whole, every day when I get up, I enjoy it. And I think that to me is success because when everything is taken away, when anything that's material is taken away, so cars, houses, stuff, for me, success is being happy and I love what I do.

Elyse: Thank you. Well, Jemma, it's been great to have you on the show. Thank you so much for taking the time to do this.

Where can people find you?

Jemma: So it probably easiest to find me through the companies that I run. We're on Instagram as @educationhotel, we're on Facebook as the education hotel. From there, you're probably able to get to the other one, which is top school and uni, also on [00:34:00] Instagram as @topschoolanduni.

We have a website www.educationhotel.co.uk.

But yeah, those are the places that you'll find me.

Elyse: Wonderful. Well, Jemma, it's been a pleasure. Thanks so much for joining us.

Jemma: Thanks for having me.