

“You Should Create a Job That You’ll Never Need a Vacation from and Turn It into a Career”



Alice S. N. Kim



Alice S. N. Kim

Abstract In our interview with Alice Kim, we discuss how an academic topic such as memory and learning can become a non-profit company focused on the application of that topic to applied contexts. After a post-doctoral position in a teaching and learning centre and not finding another organization that sufficiently aligned with her interests, Alice founded a non-profit corporation that allows her to continue doing research on topics that interest her. She does, however, also suggest that forming and growing a corporation requires ample consideration, including a financial plan, team focus, and support network. A drive to turn research into implementation can create an opportunity for yourself.

A. S. N. Kim (✉)

Teaching and Learning Research in Action, Toronto, ON, Canada
e-mail: alice.kim@tlraction.com

Contents

Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?.....	54
What was the focus of your PhD?.....	54
As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?.....	55
Your second postdoctoral position, at the teaching and learning centre, sounds a bit different than a typical postdoctoral role. What kind of work did you do in this position?.....	55
Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?.....	55
A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?.....	56
Can you tell us a bit more about some of the specific projects you've worked on, as examples?.....	56
If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a similar position as you have now, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?.....	57
If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?.....	58
How did you determine that starting a corporation was the next step towards achieving your goals? For instance, as opposed to working for a company that had sufficiently aligned interests.....	58
What do you like most about your work?.....	58
What do you like least about your work?.....	59
Are there some aspects of academic research that you miss?.....	59
Based on your journey, what is some advice or suggestions you would want to pass on to someone who's currently finishing their PhD?.....	59
Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?.....	60

Chris: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a bit about your current position?

Alice: About a year ago, I founded a non-profit corporation called Teaching and Learning Research In Action or TLR. I'm currently the Managing Director of TLR, which investigates and publicizes effective teaching and learning practices. Although researching effective pedagogical practices is a large part of what we do at TLR, we focus on making the results of pedagogical research more accessible to the public through non-traditional means of dissemination.

What was the focus of your PhD?

My PhD dissertation, which was a continuation of my MA dissertation, was focused on the neural correlates of how we learn at a very basic level. More specifically, I investigated patterns of electrical brain activity (or electroencephalography, EEG) that occur when we form new associations. Throughout my graduate studies, I became increasingly interested in not only how we form new associations but also how we can form new associations more effectively – in other words, how can we enhance our memory and learning. I completed both my MA and PhD in the Psychology Department at the University of Toronto, where I started my graduate studies in 2007 and completed them in 2013.

As you were finishing your PhD, what were you thinking about your career plans?

As I was finishing my PhD, I was becoming more interested in applying what we know about memory and learning, specifically how we can learn better, to real-world contexts. The first of my two postdoctoral fellowships allowed me to start exploring how memory research can be applied in educational, industry, and clinical settings. From there, I became more drawn to applying memory research in an educational context, which led to my second postdoctoral fellowship at the teaching and learning centre at the same institution where I completed my first postdoctoral position. In hindsight, my experiences at the centre as a scholarship of teaching and learning researcher had a huge impact on the trajectory of my career plans and where I am and what I’m doing today.

Your second postdoctoral position, at the teaching and learning centre, sounds a bit different than a typical postdoctoral role. What kind of work did you do in this position?

Yes, postdoctoral positions at teaching and learning centres were quite new when I held mine, and I believe they are still quite rare though growing in number. My main role as a postdoctoral fellow in the teaching and learning centre was to engage in scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) or, in other words, conduct pedagogical research. However, I worked closely with a team of educational developers and was given the opportunity, and was also encouraged, to explore the landscape of educational development. This led to my providing statistical support for faculty conducting research on their own teaching, as well as my facilitating various instructional skills workshops for faculty. I also continued teaching in the Psychology Department throughout my postdoctoral position at the centre. Altogether, my experiences at the centre, particularly working closely with a team of educational developers, made me more aware of several pedagogical issues. Most importantly, I’ve come to appreciate that there are many layers to effective teaching; when I started my postdoctoral position at the centre, my research interests were focused on implementing cognitive learning principles in course design, but now I recognize that although this is important, there are also other components that need to be considered when it comes to effective teaching practices.

Can you tell us a bit about what day-to-day life is like in your current position?

Although the impact of COVID-19 had modified my daily routine, my professional goals still coincide with leading TLR and carrying out its mission, which is to investigate and publicize effective teaching and learning practices. This involves working with an interdisciplinary team, including media producers, educators with various

backgrounds, and student partners, as well as external partners (e.g. other organizations and institutions). On a weekly basis, I work with and mentor student partners and conduct and oversee SoTL and its dissemination (traditional and non-traditional means); however, a significant portion of my week is also dedicated to managing the corporation, including carving out its next steps. For example, throughout the pandemic, I've been highly involved in conducting research on teaching during the pandemic with my student partners and colleagues from other institutions, producing a SoTL podcast in partnership with a teaching and learning centre at an Ontario university, as well as consulting for other organizations and building relationships with potential external partners.

A lot of people like academia because they feel it gives them an opportunity to work on a topic that they deeply care about. Do you think this is also true in your current position?

Yes, absolutely. In my current position I'm working on topics that I care deeply about and in a way that is most fulfilling for me. At TLR, we choose the topics that we work on as a team, though all within the realm of SoTL. I can see myself doing this for the rest of my life and never getting tired of it. I like having one foot in SoTL research and teaching and the other focused on broad, widespread dissemination of SoTL research.

Can you tell us a bit more about some of the specific projects you've worked on, as examples?

Right now we're wrapping up two studies on teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the studies is focused on students' experience of the shift from face-to-face delivery of their courses to emergency remote delivery, as well as their experiences of distance learning throughout the rest of the course. We had students complete guided reflections biweekly from the start of the transition to remote learning and asked them to reflect on what was helping them stay engaged with their coursework and what actions from anyone in the course they found most helpful. On the flip side, we also asked students to reflect on and identify factors that distanced them from their coursework. The study was meant to be formative in the sense that we wanted to share our findings with instructors delivering courses in the fall and winter semesters of the 2020/2021 school year, anticipating that at least some proportion of courses would continue to be delivered remotely. In addition to presenting our findings at the Canadian Psychological Association's Virtual Series (online conference) this past August, we've also shared our findings publicly on our website in written and video format. Our second COVID-19 study is an

autoethnography written collaboratively by instructors and students on their experiences of teaching and learning throughout the pandemic, which we hope will provide insight on this topic from multiple perspectives.

Another series of projects that we are working on is focused on inequity in higher education, specifically on how we can break down barriers that first-generation students face in this context. The first-generation status is generally defined as neither parent nor guardian having obtained a bachelor’s degree. This group of students is known to frequently encounter more obstacles that interfere with their academic success compared to non-first-generation students, making initiatives that uplift and support first-generation students very important for their success in higher education. In addition to conducting research on this topic, we are also working on a teacher-ready research review with the aim of providing educators with evidence-based recommendations for how they can design and deliver their courses in a manner that is more equitable to first-generation students. As part of our community outreach, we’re also mentoring an interdisciplinary team of capstone students at York University to model a solution that enhances the success and achievement of first-generation students in higher education. We hope that all of these initiatives will help contribute to the larger objective of making higher education more inclusive for everyone.

If someone currently finishing their PhD was considering a similar position as you have now, how might they decide if it would be a good fit?

I think there are a lot of important factors to consider, and the weighting of each of them likely differs depending on one’s priorities and personal circumstances. For me, being passionate about the cause of the corporation is extremely important because it’s what keeps me energized and motivates me to continue working through tough times. It’s also very important for me to ensure that I can lead the start-up in a sustainable manner, both in terms of the functioning of the corporation and my personal livelihood. That being said, it has been very important for me to be flexible and adaptive and to keep the bigger picture and the end goal in mind so that I can negotiate various contracts and situations to move my corporation forward. I’m learning more each day about making good business decisions – it can be very difficult, as what is best of the corporation does not always align with how I would prefer to proceed as an individual. In my experiences, it’s very important to always remember that the corporation is not about me; it’s much bigger than me – it’s all about the cause and mission. This comes back to why being passionate about the cause of my start-up is so important for me to be able to hold my position.

If someone was interested in pursuing a similar career path, what would you suggest they do to better prepare themselves?

I would suggest that they carefully review all the relevant information about starting a corporation and that they create a solid financial and operating plan both for the corporation and themselves. Again, it is very important to make sure that the corporation is sustainable and that they have the means to lead the start-up through to maturation. I would also suggest that they make sure that they have a strong support network – both professional and personal. It is extremely important to surround yourself with people who you can trust and rely on. Choose your founding board of directors very carefully, and make sure that the members of your working team are not only skilled and talented but that they are also able to work well with the other members of your team. Lastly, you should move away from the corporation being about one person and develop systems so that it continues even when individuals transition in and out of the team.

How did you determine that starting a corporation was the next step towards achieving your goals? For instance, as opposed to working for a company that had sufficiently aligned interests.

I wasn't able to find another organization that was sufficiently aligned with my interests, particularly the focus on disseminating the results of research on effective teaching and learning practices through non-traditional means, that is, beyond peer-reviewed journal articles, conference and meeting presentations, book chapters, etc. I know of individual and teams of academics who have put forth a lot of effort to share the results of research relevant to teaching and learning with educators and have made a big impact, but I think their aims are different in that they focus on applying one or more concepts/phenomena from their own discipline to support educators with the goal of community outreach. The mission of TLR centres more on disseminating the results of recent research on teaching and learning that spans across various disciplines and through various types of mediums, including podcasts, videos, and other media. In terms of organizations, there are many that produce and support research on teaching and learning, but I'm not aware of any that also focus on the public dissemination piece.

What do you like most about your work?

It's hard to decide because I think this is always changing for me. Right now, I would say that what I like most about my work is what we do as a team and the broad scope of our work, which ranges from conducting empirical research to developing and supporting social movement campaigns and sharing information via mainstream media – all within the context of SoTL. Equally, though, it is also the

people I work with – the diversity of everyone’s backgrounds and expertise and how we are all brought together by our beliefs and concerns for various topics within the broader context of education to work collaboratively. Needless to say, everyone I work with is very special. I also feel very gratified when the results of our research are applied through others’ teaching and/or learning practices – this is extremely meaningful to me because I believe that education can be life changing and at the heart of solutions to important societal issues.

What do you like least about your work?

What I like least about my work – that the scope of our work is limited by lack of time and resources. I think it can be challenging to decide what projects will be pursued by our team given that we have broad interests and we’re still in the very early stages as a corporation. I look forward to growing as a corporation so that we will have more resources to take on more, or larger-scale, projects. Currently, however, we are limited by our available resources, but perhaps this is the sentiment of most others as well in different positions and how I will always feel no matter how large TLR grows.

Are there some aspects of academic research that you miss?

I think I’m still closely linked to academic research via the SoTL research I do through TLR. Although SoTL is academic, it is not highly celebrated as a prestigious field of academic research (at least that is my sense and many others in the field), but it should be. Part of the reason I started TLR was to bring more attention to SoTL and the impact it can have on teaching practices and more generally education. I think my current portfolio essentially includes almost everything I did in my postdoctoral position at the teaching and learning centre and more. To recap, I think academic research is still a part of what I do, it is just that the context is now a bit different.

Based on your journey, what is some advice or suggestions you would want to pass on to someone who’s currently finishing their PhD?

The best piece of advice I was given is that you should create a job that you’ll never need a vacation from and turn it into a career. On top of this, I would say that although there are definitely systems in place, there is still space and ways to work outside of traditional spaces and positions to carve out a career that works for you. If you find that there is a dream job out there waiting for you, then you should go for it! However, if everything is less than perfect (or what you would be happy with), don’t be afraid to create something new. In other words, if you don’t fit the mould, try creating something that fits you.

Is there anything else you'd like to tell someone reading this interview?

The only thing I would mention at this point is that, needless to say, everyone's experiences are different. I think it is helpful and informative to read about the experiences of others, but it is also important for the reader to remember that their life circumstances and the factors that they need to prioritize may not match those of the individuals sharing their experiences in this book. Generally, I would say that the reader should move their lives in a direction that works for them and their specific circumstances.

Thank you so much for telling us about your work and career path, Alice!