

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #309

Jason Blair:

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We are the projects of society, of humanity, and we have to recognize that we're never gonna be fixed. We're never gonna be set in stone, right? We have to always be adapting. And if we can prepare kids for that in school, that's how we're gonna help them be successful.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Jason Blair, a transformative force in arts education, and founder of the Agents of Change Festival, and frequent guest on Learning Unboxed, and one of my favorite teachers of all time. So, Jason, welcome to the program. I'm so happy to have you today.

Jason Blair:

Thanks for having me back. I'm always excited to talk with you.

Annalies Corbin:

Ah! Well, the feeling is definitely mutual. And so, let's set some context for our listeners as we get started because we're gonna be talking about the Agents of Change Festival today. And the Agents of Change Festival challenges a fundamental question: What if school was designed for agency and not compliance? This gathering brings together students from across central Ohio who are already living the answer.

In front of an authentic audience, they showcase learning driven by voice, ownership, and purpose. The goal is not just to celebrate these examples, but to disrupt expectations, giving families and community members a tangible sense of what's possible, and empowering them to demand more – more agency, more authenticity, and more humanity in our schools.

Wow. Pretty impressive.

Jason Blair:

I mean, from hearing, being fortunate enough to listen to the podcast over the years that you've created and your work with PAST Foundation, like it's very much aligned. I mean, it is at the bare minimum, I think the whole purpose of it is to strip back everything from what it means, what students are asking for us, and what it is, is attention and mattering and purpose. That's what they're asking for.

And what that looks like, whether it's project-based learning, whether it's through the arts, whether it's through dance, whatever that is, as long as they have those three basic things that are met, that's what they're asking for. And so, that festival, this festival is an attempt to create that opportunity for students.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. So, let's step back just a little bit from it, because you've been involved in being a big advocate for more agency for students for a very long time. This is not new territory for you. So, what changed? What was the lever that said to you, "Jason, it's time. I need to do this thing"? So why this festival? Why now? Why that moment, rather than just allowing the natural work of advocating for more agency in classrooms? 'Cause like you said, we're actively engaged in that work in a variety of different ways. So, why did you feel like this was the way to tackle some of these pieces and parts?

Jason Blair:

I think there were a couple factors that played into it. One was, when we started it in 2019, it was based on some groups of teachers that had gathered at the Columbus Museum of Art, and they were teachers from all different disciplines from all over at this Creativity Institute. And we left, and it was very empowering and a powerful experience. And for me, it just left this seed of we have these experiences, but we never ever see how they come to fruition. What happened? How was that teacher transformed? And what experiences did they create for their kids?

So, I thought about, well, let's just get these teachers back together and have them share and showcase and put their students in front of audiences to share that. And so,

that's what we did. And for me, it was a case of, one was we need to get out of the silos of our school districts, right? And get away from the sort of competitiveness of this district does it this way, this district does it that way. The reality is there's teachers doing this work all across the country. And so, it's how do we start to put a spotlight or create a venue for them to share that? And not only just to empower their students, but also to help them as teachers realize I'm not alone in this. I'm not alone in this idea that I wanna have more empowering agentic experiences for my kids.

And then, the other sort of aspect for me was that idea of helping the students... providing this opportunity for the students to have an audience, but it's even more than an audience. I think most parents want this type of learning. I think that if you played it out there plain and simple and said, "This is the type of learner that we're trying to create," they would want that. The problem is we don't have enough examples of that.

And so, what happens is this sort of cycle of parents sitting there, perpetuating this collective illusion of the parents sitting around and saying, "Well, I don't really think that standardized testing is really gonna what's gonna stick in the long run, but I don't know what else to say, and I think the parents to the left and right of me are gonna say probably testing, so I think I'll just say that out loud." But that's not what they want.

And so, this festival's another way to get parents and community members to come in and see from all across Central Ohio what does it look like when students are in charge of their learning? And then, the hope, the aspiration being that they go back and say, "I want more of that. I want my child to be in another classroom like this next year, in a school like this, in a district like this." And keep growing that through the organic way of instead of starting from the school, it's like starting from the parents, like getting the parents to advocate "I want my child to have that type of experience where learning wasn't just memorized, it was felt, it was experienced, it was visceral." And that's really the impetus for the festival.

Annalies Corbin:

And thank you for using the word visceral, right? Because that's exactly how I feel, right? It has to be so all-consuming, right? And my response to it has to be flashpoint, right? It has to be based on just this epic feeling of joy and surrender and acceptance. That's what learning should feel like. That's what learning should look like. That's what learning should be impacting in me as an individual and everybody around me. So, thank you for that.

As you step back then a little bit from this and think about the fact that there's been a couple of years, more than a couple, a few years now of rolling on this, but it's almost

as if there was some sort of spark, a momentum that's happened more recently with the way the community's responding to this. So, is that just perception or is that actual fact? Because it appears, Jason, from the outside looking in, that suddenly, this is really being embraced in a way that it's not that it wasn't before, but it's almost like maybe more folks have figured it out.

Jason Blair:

Yeah, I think, in Columbus specifically, we're fortunate to have a lot of just really brilliant thinkers, brilliant educators and people that are trying to harness the momentum that is happening around here around more agency and empowerment. And for the Age of Change Festival, it's been a fascinating journey because we have classes there. This year, we had a first grade classroom all the way up through a high school IB class. And that's just fascinating to see them interact with each other, and talking with the high school kids and how excited they are to share with these younger kids that come in and have them have to figure out how they're gonna relay this highly complex information they're doing in an IB high school class to a first grader from a school district, across town. So, that's been really fascinating.

And I think, the reason why it's resonating is because there's this palpable feeling that everybody knows the system is not working. I mean, obviously, that's how you open Learning Unboxed, right? We understand that the system is not working. And I think, now, people are realizing that we need to do something about it. And I think it also is the case of, there's not gonna be a life raft given to anybody, right? You have to seek out on your own. You have to be willing to take that risk and step out there to say, "I've got to put my foot down and say this is what I'm gonna do to create meaningful experiences for my kids."

And I think there's power in numbers. And when you see other teachers from across Central Ohio that are doing it and their students are doing it, and all of a sudden you're like, "You know what? I can do this, too." And to realize that it is one of those things that it's not an added extra. That's the thing about the Age of Change Festival is these teachers are masterful at creating experiences for kids where they have this sort of agentic experiences, but it's not a separate thing. It's woven throughout the day. And that's the beauty of it and understanding that that's what it is.

And so, I think it feels like it's necessary right now. It feels like that's how you bring back... not to sugarcoat at all. It's hard work. But the thing about the hard work is that at the end of the day, you rest your head on the pillow saying, "That was a meaningful day." That was not me telling the students to turn to page 36 and reading through a script. That was me actually responding and pivoting in real time to a student's interests and inquiries. That was a student responding to another student. It was like

the classroom is truly alive when you're doing that. Otherwise, it just becomes a sort of rote, mindless space that is just everybody parallel playing together and nobody's actually learning or growing at all.

Annalies Corbin:

Right. 100%. Yes. Agree. Let's get into a little bit of the nuts and bolts. So, for our listeners around the world, so we recognize that this is something that's going on in Central Ohio. However, I think that by really pulling this apart a little bit, you can figure out, "How could I do something similar in my own community?" Because the reality is, and Jason has been an advocate for this for a very long time, is that as great educators, we have the skills, we have the momentum, typically, right? And we can launch. And so, you could take a variation of what we're talking about today and do it just in your classroom. You could do it in your end of the building with several teachers who wanna join you. You could do it bigger and broader across your district. You could make it a community endeavor across numerous different school experiences. So, there's many ways to approach this.

So, let's start, Jason, with if I'm an educator in Central Ohio, I've, I know nothing about this, and I wanna be part of it, what do I need to know, and how do I go about joining in?

Jason Blair:

Yeah. So, that's a great question. So, one of the things that we look for are those teachers that are... it's already wired into them as far as making sure that students are front and center. And so, one of the things I'll tell them is, we wanna make sure it's not a science fair. It's not a trifold poster. There's gotta be an element of interactivity, so that your students are sharing an abridged version of a learning journey that they went on in their classroom, whether that was a six-week immersive project or whether that was a whole year project. But at some point, it's gotta be turned over to them, so they're gonna create some sort of interactive experience.

So, the teachers that come there, whether it was the first grade teacher or the high school IB class, they have about 20 minutes or so to share what they did that year and how they were in charge of learning. But then, the more important part is the interactivity. So afterwards, then, the students in groups or individuals or whatever create an opportunity for people who are coming in to visit the space, because remember, these are gonna be parents from across Central High. They might not necessarily be from your child's classroom. How they interact and how they're gonna take these visitors onto an abridged version. So, that's one element that we ask the teachers to have.

And then the other thing is throughout the year, I'll host Zoom or Google Meet sessions to talk with teachers about where's your mind at? What are you thinking about? What are some trouble points that are coming up? And from those things sprout up all the time. We had one teacher that was struggling to say, "I'm not sure what we can share at the Agents of Change Festival." And what they found out was that in the morning, every morning, it was chaotic in the morning, and there was a lot happening, and she was feeling stressed that there was a lot of chitter-chat going on in the beginning, and they weren't settling in. And so she said, "Instead of that, let me lean into that. Let me start leaning into this more and seeing what's there, and let's let these kids have this soft start to the day, and let's have there be more games they're playing to start off."

And so, that was the whole focus. And so, the focus when they shared at that exhibition was some of the things that they do in their morning experiences to set the tone for the day. And so, it's not super complex. It's listening. It's leaning in. It's seeing where your kids are. It's the idea of not going into it with your answer. It's going into it with your question, right? To look at your space and say, "What's truly happening here? And where are my students' heads at? Where is their curiosity going? Where is their attention going?" And seeing how you can create that into experience.

And so we talk that through together. And so, it becomes something where it's like you're not fighting against those things that are happening in your classroom. You're leaning into them more. And then, you're using those as artifacts of learning, as artifacts of growth. And so the beauty of that becomes, 90% of the time, then they're not rooted in one specific discipline. They're rooted more in the child's life because you're listening to who that child is and you're going from there.

And so, these are no longer about how do we create meaningful projects, but how do we create meaningful people? And that's the basis of it.

Annalies Corbin:

The other thing, I guess, I would point out is that one of the things that really appeals to me about this particular approach is you're also leaning into very, very specifically being part of a child's journey to becoming, right? They are on the road to whatever they are going to be, and it's a big, giant blank canvas that gets splashes of color through every experience that they encounter. And what an incredible opportunity to step back and reflect on the fact that you were part of someone becoming. It's a little daunting, and awing, and inspiring, and-

Jason Blair:

It is. It is. And I'm so glad you said that, too. And that, in my sort of side quest right

now, I'm actually trying to write my own book, and it is about that exact thing of how artists can help us understand in who we're becoming, and the world needs that right now. And that's the thing about school is we need to look at school like that. School is a site of becoming, and to recognize that at any point of a child's journey, they're becoming somebody different.

And so, what that means for us as teachers is asking really thoughtful, reflective questions about ourselves and the experiences we're creating for our kids, and then of our students, right? So, it's like looking around the room and seeing, what are students paying attention to? Who are they becoming through these experiences?

And then, the last thing, it goes to the Agents of Change Festival, is who gets to witness and value that becoming? And that's where that Agents of Change Festival comes in, and I think what you said about becoming is beautiful 'cause that's what it is. That's what I think we're losing sight of is that school is not... now more than ever, right? Now more than ever, we have to prepare kids to be in a constant state of becoming, to understand that there's an evolution, there's an iteration of ourselves as much as there is a project.

We are the projects of society, of humanity, and we have to recognize that we're never gonna be fixed. We're never gonna be set in stone, right? We have to always be adapting, and if we can prepare kids for that in school, that's how we're gonna help them be successful. To go through school to say "If you know this fact and this fact, you'll be successful," kids already know that's false. They're entering school on a false premise.

Annalies Corbin:

Oh, they know. And that is front and center, right? That's so much of the disengagement. That's so much of the pushback. Kids that are currently in our classroom that are in this big, giant dysfunctional system, they are super savvy to that, right? And so, we do such a huge disservice by not acknowledging, quite frankly, the BS right out of the gate.

Jason Blair:

And when they sense that right away, then that's when you have all these things popping up of behavior or lack of engagement, things like that, and so then the fault then turns to the kid. It's not the kid, it's the system. And so, it's that age-old idea of trying to fit the kid into the system when really we need to break the system and have the system fit the kid, and we just need to figure that out.

And I'm optimistic because I do think this movement is growing amongst teachers. Because everybody's saying it. Industry's saying, "You're not preparing us. You're not preparing us with kids that are going to..." Parents are saying, "My kids are disengaged." Kids are like, "I don't like it." Teachers are like, "It's taking the joy out of..." Everybody's saying the same message, right? And I think the reason why those, like the Agents of Change Festival and things like that are powerful because we're finally pulling back the veil and saying, "You know what? Nobody has any answers."

What we need right now is people iterating nonstop, so we can find that, and if we have classrooms full of experimentation, districts full of experimentation, we will find solutions. And if we can start pulling that veil back to say, "We don't have the answers, but we need everybody working around the clock like crazy trying to create experiments as in a culture of iteration in our classrooms," then I think we'll start to figure out our next steps.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. Absolutely. And we also just need to recognize that all the iteration is spectacular, but it should never and nor will it ever end in the creation of a new sort of global system because that's where the problem lies, right? We have to recognize that we are talking about humanity, and humanity is billions of individuals.

Jason Blair:

Yeah.

Annalies Corbin:

That's the thing. The factory model does not lend itself to the growth of a fully formed human.

Jason Blair:

Yes. And I think one of the things, the reason why we struggle with answers sometimes is because when there are these pockets that happen in classrooms, inevitably the question that comes down from a central office or higher up is, "How do we scale that?" Right when you ask that question, you've ruined the whole thing because you don't scale it. You create the conditions through sort of this rhizomatic approach where you're creating pockets of, it can't look the same across the district. It just can't because the kids, like you said, are all different. You have to create the conditions where the teacher feels the freedom to try out different ways and different approaches.

But as soon as you start focusing on scaling it, then the teachers start feeling like well, okay, you want me to share with somebody else," and then they're like that didn't

work, so that..." You create this self-defeating cycle that doesn't work because you just talked about that thing in that one classroom, in that one district worked. Let's scale that across all the districts. You can't do that, right? The scaling, it's different.

Annalies Corbin:

It is. And it's definitely not about scale. It's about spread, right? It's the spread of the ideology and the opportunity, to your point, right? But it's definitely not about scale. And it's the same thing, right? We get hit with that all the time. What's it gonna look like PAST Foundation at scale? It's not because PAST Foundation should never scale, but it should spread. The pieces and parts that are relevant to the individual recipient who's grabbing something that we're doing or something that you're doing or something that some other great educator down the road is doing, pulling it into my own environment with my own students and my own experience and creating something new with it. That's the magic.

Jason Blair:

Yeah. Yeah. If, it's like if the kids feel like they have the attention, if they feel like they matter, if they feel like they're honored, your sense of becoming that's the sort of core foundation that can tran... That's what can spread all across. What that looks like, whether it's PAST Foundation, whether it's an elementary school, whether it's, an outdoor school in Bali that's where that sort of spread is.

But yeah, it's just getting down to the roots of what is it that the kids are asking us for it now, and they're being as loud as they can possibly be, and I think we just need to listen to them.

Annalies Corbin:

We absolutely 100% need to listen to them, and they have the ideas. And the reality is, if we would step back for two seconds and let our incredible young learners lead, they will take us to that place. And that place where they arrive is going to be... It'll be magical. It'll look different everywhere, to the point of the conversation that we're having. But we don't have to solve for this, but we do have to make room for our learners to be able to get us there with them.

Jason Blair:

Yes.

Annalies Corbin:

And that's a very different approach, right? It's one of the reasons why I love the Agent of Change Festival is because you're helping individual educators and communities of learners lead the way for themselves. That's really a spectacular thing. Absolutely.

Jason Blair:

And for the teachers, what it does is, I think the biggest thing that sort of paralyzes people is fear: fear of the unknown, fear of letting go. And what Agents of Change does is create these teachers that, some of them have done it now since the start. You don't have that fear as much because you know there's somebody else on that journey with you. And there's power in numbers. And I think that's what keeps us back a lot of times on any level is this idea of fear of judgment, fear of the unknown, fear of letting go of control.

But once you get to the other side of that and you recognize that you honor that fear, but you say you don't let it hold you back, and that's when the students step forward, and you're 100% of the time blown away by the students, exceeding anything you could have possibly designed yourself on your own. It's just letting go of that moment of the paralyzation of fear and realizing that what's on the other side of it, don't let it stop you, what's on the other side of that because our negativity bias comes in.

What if on the other side of that fear is awe and joy and hope and this resilience that we've been missing? We won't know that unless we take that leap.

Annalies Corbin:

And we just have to be brave enough, yeah, confident enough to say, "I don't know what I don't know, and I'm okay with that." That is a powerful life lesson, right, as part of our own professional learning and journeys as well. So, really, really impactful.

Okay. So, let's circle back around one last time then with this idea of I wanna do this thing. How do I engage? Do I send an email? Do I make a phone call? Is there a form I fill out? Nuts and bolts, Jason. I'm an educator in Central Ohio, and I want to be part of this. What do I need to do?

Jason Blair:

Yeah, you can send me an email. I've got a website up that you can look at, and there's a form on there. You can fill it out. If other people know other teachers that wanna be involved, we've been fortunate enough to be able to have it around different local area schools, so we have a spot that can host large amounts of people. We started off our first year at probably 150 parents and community members, and last year we had about 500, and we had, I think, six or seven different school districts. We had some that are outside of school districts We had some independent schools as well.

So, yeah, reaching out to me through the website, and we can get the ball rolling, and it's one of those things. We'll have a Zoom or a meeting session in the fall for anybody

that wants to hop on that's new to it. And then, we sort of touch base throughout the year and then usually it culminates in, in April or May with the final exhibition of learning.

Annalies Corbin:

And we will make sure all of those links, the information is in the show notes as always. So, please go there and I would encourage you to reach out to Jason for sure. What if I'm not in Central Ohio? What if I'm not even in Ohio at all, Jason, but I really wanna learn? Is there a way for me to do that's easy?

Jason Blair:

Yeah, I think twofold for that. One, first of all, reach out. I'd love to talk to you about it and figure out how we can set something up similar in your area because it's extremely possible. The whole goal of this is to make it a low lift, right? Because if it's too much, it becomes overwhelming. And even to the point where, some teachers have said, "We could have some food trucks and things like that." And I said, no. I was like, "The focus is only on the kids. We don't want there to be food trucks and not have it turn into something else."

So, it's really a low lift. So, I'd be happy to help somebody set it up there. But also just if you were trying that, like you mentioned earlier, it's like figuring out, what sort of part of your day or curriculum or whatever else that you want your kids to take ownership of, and then create an opportunity for them to share out with other people where there's an interactive element. Where is there a way that they can make their learning known, and how can they help teach other people?

So, yeah, if you're not in Central Ohio, there's plenty of ways to get something like this off the ground and running in your area in any capacity. So, I would love to talk with anybody that would be interested in doing that, for sure.

Annalies Corbin:

Perfect. Perfect. And we will definitely encourage folks to reach out. So, leave us with some of the things that you've seen or learned from the kiddos who've participated, because at the end of the day, this whole conversation is about kids and about our young learners. So, I have no doubt actually that you have seen and heard some pretty remarkable things at the Agents of Change Festival, some things that probably surprised you and thrilled you all at the same time.

Jason Blair:

There were so many. Like there's so many different levels of it, right? So, the one level is the learning itself, right? So, what's on exhibit at the learning has been amazing.

From students going down to Central Ohio, a housing authority to make pitches on how to reimagine Columbus from a marketing standpoint to make it feel more inclusive, having kids share that. So, the learning there was, like, one thing that you were in awe about.

But the actual event and the night of, what I'm always in awe about, is seeing the interactivity between the kids. Like I went into one of the IB classes, and I was talking with one of the students from another district, and she was telling me all about the learning that they had done. And a little first grader had walked in, and she immediately said, "Excuse me, I've gotta help this little girl out here." So, she went over, and I just watched her use the language and adjust what she was telling me about two minutes prior, to adjust her whole language set for this little six-year-old that was coming in that wanted to know what she was doing. And she sat with her, and she got down on her level and talked with her about it.

And just the power in that moment we've had moments where the resilience and the... So, last year, we had an opening, and the keynote, or not the keynote, but the emcee of the event was sick and wasn't able to come. So, I went up to one of the high school seniors like, "Hey, listen, we don't have an emcee. Would you mind stepping up there and winging it?" And yeah, he did it. He did it, jumped right in, was amazing. Super thankful about it afterwards and just an amazing person.

We had one a couple years ago where a parent who ran some sort of recreational company heard the keynote, which was a young lady from another district, not from that parent's, and they ended up hiring her based on her opening keynote because of what she had exhibited and how she had shared and how she articulated her vision and everything. They hired her for a summer internship job. And again, that's powerful because those are literally two communities that wouldn't have crossed paths at all from that.

And then, recent one, too, that was always powerful was, I was stopped by a parent in the hallway in the stairwell going up, and she said, "I gotta tell you something. I was listening to the news before I came here today, and I just wasn't feeling good. The news is just horrendous." And she said, "For the last hour, I've been so inspired by seeing and hearing these kids that I feel like our world is in much better hands than we think it is."

And it's like those are just the stories of the night of that make me think "Okay, this is all worth it." It's creating opportunities for the community to start seeing the brilliance of our students, of the our youngest learners that live amongst us. It's an inspiring and powerful evening and I wouldn't change it for the world.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. I love that so much. Jason, thank you so much for taking time out of your day. We really appreciate you sharing the Agents of Change Festival with us, helping us understand it, why it can in fact be an Agent of Change, right? So, we really appreciate it. Thank you so much.

Jason Blair:

Thanks for having me. I enjoyed talking as well.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely.

Annalies Corbin:

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