

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #292

Lisa Huffman:

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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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And today we're going to be talking about all things early college experience, micro schools, the state of K-12, and how all of that translates into success in post-secondary for students.

And joining us today is Lisa Huffman, Dean of the University of Cincinnati's College of Education, Criminal Justice, Human Services, and Information Technology. So, Lisa, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Lisa Huffman:

No, thank you. Thank you for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

I'm super excited to have the conversation. And just a little bit of context for our listeners as it relates to the University of Cincinnati's College of Education, Criminal Justice, Human Services, and Information Technology is committed to the pursuit of discovery and excellence in research, teaching, and service that addresses real-world challenges and opportunities to create positive social change.

The nationally renowned college includes four academic schools: the School of Education, the School of Criminal Justice, the School of Human Services, and the School of Information Technology. And the program serves the university a whole 5,000 plus students with 151 full -time faculty, offering 35 degree programs and 39 certificates.

Lisa Huffman:

We're actually almost 6900 students in our college.

Annalies Corbin:

Wow.

Lisa Huffman:

Yes, and we have about the right amount of faculty there. We have about 400 faculty and staff across the four schools. We have 20 centers, 20 plus centers. So, we have a lot of programs. I think we have many degrees, certificates across all those areas, and are trying to solve the big problems and challenges that face our society today.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And it's wonderful to see so many people engaging in a variety of different ways and the program variety that you offer. And just for our listeners, so Lisa and team are here at the PAST Innovation Lab. So, this is one of those wonderful opportunities where we get to have a conversation in person, not just virtually for Learning Unboxed.

And we're really talking today about the partnership that we've created around the early IT micro school, early IT K -12 programming, our high school program, early college. It has been a program that's existed within the University of Cincinnati for some time. That's not new to us. Our iteration is a little bit different, but mostly what we want to talk about is, why is post -secondary so interested in doing something different as it relates to the K -12 space? At the end of the day, why are we in partnership together?

Lisa Huffman:

That's a great question, and I think the one that really faces us today. We know that we are hearing, on a daily basis, that workforce and industries, our students graduating high school or graduating university experiences, are not career prepared. But we also know that the careers our students need to be prepared for haven't even been created yet.

And so, it's a time for us, an opportunity. While we think of it as a challenge, I think of it as an opportunity for us to rethink how we can work together. We are an ecosystem. It

is from the K -12 experience that then supports those individuals we develop at the university that then go into the workforce, but the reverse is also true.

And so, it's an opportunity for us to think outside the box about how we engage with students and how do we prompt them earlier to be creative problem solvers. That's what the hallmark of an American education has been. We solve big problems. We come up with unique solutions. How do we do that now in an era that is so heavily focused on the STEM fields? They're not the only fields but it is really where we're at right now. And how do we do that in a way that engages students in learning in a way that directly leads to the workforce? They can see themselves in the workforce. The workforce can see the student as ready for that.

And that's the works in the elementary schools, the middle schools, the high schools, through the university and out into the workforce. Then, we're not going to spend as much time having to come back and upskill. We're also helping our students ask better questions, solve better problems. That's why we're in partnership. We need each other. We are a part of an ecosystem. If we're going to really be prepared for what's next, which today is just a possibility, but tomorrow is the reality, we have to work together.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And we're thrilled to be able to do that work together. And I want to tap into one of the things that you mentioned here, specifically around this idea that we know that if we don't do anything different, and we continue on the path that we have been on, we hear from our industry partners, you hear as a university, I hear leading the PAST Foundation, our other partners are all telling us the same thing, that our young professionals, either after post -secondary or right out of high school entering work, are showing up there and having to be remediated. Maybe the content, maybe not the content, but absolutely just the whole sort of skill set that is tied to problem solving and collaboration. And it's not just being on time, and it's all these pieces and parts.

And these are things that we know that all of our students are capable of learning really, really early. And it just becomes part of their DNA. It's ingrained in the work that we do. And yet, we push people through such rigidly structured systems that it's very difficult for them to gain the autonomy necessary and early on to be able to be that individual on the back side.

Lisa Huffman:

True. And there's a lot of reasons for it. We can spend a whole episode on the reasons behind that, but I think where we're at is now it's time for us all to lean in and work together. And it's not about blaming one side or the other. It's not about this rule or that law. It's how do we come together and say yes, and then figure out a solution that

is different than what we've been doing because we see it across the board. It's not test scores that are actually showing who's successful in the workforce. We're actually struggling in the workforce. So, maybe we need to rethink it. It's not that they're behind when they come to college or they're behind when they get to the workforce. We just need something different than our system was designed for. I mean, our educational system was designed in an era of the manufacturing era, the industrial revolution kind of era. We need to stay at the forefront of what's next.

Annalies Corbin:

Right, absolutely. So, let's talk then a little bit about, sort of, the beyond the why. So, the University of Cincinnati, again, the early IT program has been around for many years actually, and it's successful in lots of different environments as an early high school opportunity to have post-secondary experiences. And we know that for students that are interested, those experiences, those scaffold experiences translate into positive outcomes in a variety of different ways, actually.

So, what makes this experiment that we're doing together in partnership different, and where is that difference valuable to the University of Cincinnati? Because I really want to make sure that as our listeners are contemplating some of these ideas, they're recognizing that when we talk about true partnerships, there has to be value that goes in all directions.

Lisa Huffman:

It has to be a super win-win in every partnership. Our students, our K-12 students need to win, our university students need to win, students win. But then we, the university wins, our partners win. Everybody has a winning piece in this. There's some advantage for everybody. That's what a true partnership means. It's not me bring something to you or you bring something to me. How do we get to, "Yes, that works for all of us"?

And I think what really matters here is that this partnership allows us to think differently about what we do. The beauty of our early information technology or IT program is it's hands on. And that's where I think it's been successful. We know problem-based learning is an interesting place for children to engage. So, I think that's what brought it along.

But now, in this new model of partnership with you in the micro schools, we know the best problems in the world are solved by when we have many different viewpoints at the table. And so, working across, not a teacher in a school, but multiple schools, multiple classrooms, those ideas, those solutions, those outcomes get richer, fuller, and better developed. And that's what this allows us to do, to come together. Of course, it's efficient way that we have to think about resources are limited at all levels,

but it's actually the unique different perspectives that come to the table that really helps.

And that's what industry wants. They want people who can work with people from different perspectives, and hear those ideas, and create new research, and design ideas that will lead to better solutions for all.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And just so that our listeners fully understand, so the way that we have this structured is the early IT micro school, really, is an endeavor of multiple partners. So, it's designed to bring different K-12, in this case, districts, and so that adds a level of complexity. You have an amazing team from the university that's all working in and around this. And I know that there's lots of emails and phone calls that fly back and forth. I'm looking at some of that team. "Well, we need to do this. We need to do that. And how do we sort this?" Because you've got, in this case, three different districts in the first iteration. They have their own calendar. They have their own schedule. They have their own policies. It is an epic lift to pull together.

But to your point, that's the beauty of this work, because what we're seeing on the research side of all of this is those students who otherwise don't have lens into each other, they don't have the same environments, they don't have the same backgrounds, they don't have the same life experiences, suddenly, when you put them together, which is exactly what we see in many workplace environments, they have the opportunity to learn and practice the ability to think together, to have divergent thought, to have agreement, to have everything in between.

And it's a shared resource amongst these institutions and the PAST Foundation providing coordination and support, and the university bringing in the early IT program and all the elements tied to the early college experience component. And suddenly, it's a really different thing.

And so, one of the questions that we collectively have for this is, after a few years of doing this program, can we learn enough? Can we tweak it enough? Can we figure out how it becomes a sustainable model that can then become multi-district or school endeavors in lots of places, because it shouldn't be place-bound.

Lisa Huffman:

That's correct. Place-bound, I think that's also how we limit the viewpoints individuals get to see. You hit on something that I think is essential about a micro school, is it allows people to have divergent viewpoints in a controlled environment. And that's the hallmark of problem solving, is thinking outside the box, thinking different, challenging ideas. And if you're in one school, in one place, you will learn a perspective. But we really want you to be rounded and be able to think.

So, this micro school allows students and teachers and others to come and think differently, to hear different ideas, ones you may never have thought of, "Wow, oh." And then, how does that change your own thinking? Let alone the answer to the problem that you're all working on.

And that's the research we need to do. How do we take that and take it back to schools? How do we think about different schools within larger systems? Because they're not the same, one middle school to another middle school. How can they make this process work? And how does that actually increase the quality of the work that our students produce? And how is that better aligned with their future employers?

That's the advantage. We're trying to give every child, every student an advantage when they go out in the workforce that they're ready. That's that thing they can tell somebody or demonstrate that they have over another student. And so, how do we scale this up? That is a grand challenge.

Annalies Corbin:

It is. For many, many reasons, it's complicated. But I feel like we're dedicated to figuring it out.

Lisa Huffman:

Absolutely. That's when you lean in, is in those difficult challenges. You lean in, you say, "What's working? What's not working?" And we have to put some of our own egos aside, that we are very different. This school system, that school system, this university, this foundation. Okay, what can we each give? Because we have a shared goal.

Annalies Corbin:

Right.

Lisa Huffman:

Really understanding the why. Where are the ways we can work around? So I think I always start with this phrase of, "Let's start with yes, and then we're going to figure out how to make that happen." We don't start with a no. And I think we tend to, when things are complicated, we say, "Nope, can't do it. Here's the rule," versus, "Okay, yes, there's a rule. But yes, there's got to be a solution. How do we find a shared solution?"

And the micro school is a version of that because we have different districts coming together, different calendars. How do we solve the problem, so we can have this amazing experience that we know when our students are engaged in this work, this early IT work, their outcomes are better? How do we do that? And then, what can we learn from that research that I can take it to the next grouping that won't be exactly

the same? It doesn't look like it did in the first context, but we understand the principle we need.

That's the work. That's the fun, I think. And that's really where I think education is today. We're in a different space and place, and we have rural students, urban students, suburban students, and we want them to all have access and opportunity. Careers can be in any location, but we can't limit them based on place. So, how do we create these opportunities where they come together, see the different perspectives? That's what this micro school partnership with our IT program, really, early IT program is really about is how do we bring more people in and give them opportunity? That's how we're going to have the best solutions.

Annalies Corbin:

It is. And it's also about the next iteration of what teaching and learning and work can and should look like. We know that what we're preparing our kids for is barely something we can even comprehend at the moment because things are moving so fast.

We also know that the group of individuals that we're talking about, they fundamentally want to learn and engage in different ways. They don't have the same sets of fears of technology or interaction or the way they consume knowledge, right? And so, we have to be prepared to work collectively to figure out experiences that will be powerful and meaningful for them. So, I appreciate that very much.

I also think that this is a really unique opportunity to say, "What would happen if ____?" Right? I love the if. And so, what would happen if all students had the opportunity to experience numerous microscope environments, say from the time they're in elementary school all the way through? And by the time they get to high school, by the time they get to being that 10th or 11th grader, that that's when they can hone in and say, "I love the field of IT," "I love the field of healthcare," "I love the field of building bridges and engineering," you name it, because they've had so many robust, to your point, problem-based, hands-on opportunities, not just to learn a thing, but to dig deeply and to understand that thing.

And that's what I hear when we talk to the kids in the early IT micro school. What we hear over and over again is, I think they know what that is. And suddenly, by the time they get to the end of that course, they know so much about the user interface and the user experience. And so, now, they're thinking about early IT from a completely different point of view. That, to me, is the power of change.

Lisa Huffman:

That's the answer, really, that how we're going to move ourselves forward. It's, they know more about a field, they know more about the questions they're interested in

asking. I think we often spend a lot of time around a subject but, really, it's about we should be thinking, I think, more than ever about what are the challenges and problems and questions that our students have.

And that's the path through education that I think we're going to move, where it's not a subject matter, but it's the solution they're trying to achieve. So, they have to have an entry point in. So we think we know what web design is. And wow. And here's how it changes. And now, I really want to make sure I can answer this thing or create this thing or do this problem. That's what we want. Now, they can really choose their academic programming in a very different light because they know where they want to go, what they're interested in.

And I think you said earlier, our students want to learn. This idea that students don't want to learn, no, that's not true. I think actually this generation is more risk taking. They're willing to try things out that they might fail at. They just have to understand what the goal is of them.

Annalies Corbin:

Oh, they need to see themselves in it, right? They need to see themselves.

Lisa Huffman:

This micro school provides that opportunity for them to go, "Oh!" And so having these more micro opportunities to dive deep will help students make a decision of, "Yes, I like this," "No, I don't like this," or "I sort of like this, but could I try this over here?" Isn't that what we want? We don't want people who go and just take a job when they're there. We want you to, "I love my job. I wake up every day excited to go to work." We don't know what the future is going to be, so we need them to be able to solve problems, ask questions, dig deeply because the challenges moving forward are much different.

And I don't think we can even predict what they are. So, we need them to be ready for that. So, it's yes, they need content knowledge. I'm never going to take that away from an education perspective, but it's not about teaching content for the sake of content.

Annalies Corbin:

Correct.

Lisa Huffman:

Today, more than ever, they need to see themselves in the content and how that might help them address interests of their own.

Annalies Corbin:

Correct. And we have to also remember that these kids actually consume an

exponential volume of knowledge outside of the hours that they're spending officially in a classroom or a formal education setting. So, the amount of information that kids today are actually processing is unbelievable. And we've really, really not grappled with an understanding of what that means other than some of the things that you can reach out and touch immediately is that pushback of students saying, "I don't need you to teach me this. I can go watch a YouTube video. I can figure it out. And now, I can use that knowledge and apply it in a way that has an interest in me." So, that's a lot of sort of the push -pull that's happening. And I think it is because we're not recognizing the volume of information that these kids are actually getting, (A), and (B), processing.

Lisa Huffman:

Learning never stops. I think it's a whole different world. Learning happens in snippets between other activities. So, it's not sitting 45 minutes in a classroom. It's five minutes here, 30 minutes here. It's whatever. That it is a lot more self-guided. I mean, take any child playing a video game and a YouTube video or Twitch stream, they will learn things and move quickly through.

I asked my teenage son a question, and he'll pull it out of somewhere. I'm like, "How do you know that? I could never have done that." And give me a book when I was young. Because he just sees the world and experiences the world of information in a very different way.

Annalies Corbin:

Well, they're not afraid of information, right? Because I need to know a thing, I'm going to just go find out, right? And so, yes, we have this obligation to help them sort through what they find out what's real, what's not, how credible. That's the work of the work, right? But the reality is they don't need us, in many cases, to walk them down a path of the answer. They're just going to go and find. What they need us to help them do is figure out what to do with that knowledge, how to process it effectively, and then how to actually put it to work.

And I think that's what they're asking of us. It's one of the other reasons why I really love this micro school work that we're doing, but more importantly, the partnership is tied around the micro school work that we are doing at PAST and the different partners that we have at the post-secondary level, because we've designed these to be early college experiences. And that's one of the pieces we haven't really tapped on but this becomes a huge barrier reducer, right? But more importantly, it becomes an economic driver down the road for that future that we really can't fully embrace or imagine yet.

So, let's talk a little bit about that piece because the students who go through the Early IT Microschool program, they are actually earning University of Cincinnati

credits. In some cases, it might be on school and articulated a little bit differently. But the reality is they're earning real credit, and they're earning credit from highly qualified instructors. They're getting university experience, and it translates into less time on task post-graduation.

Lisa Huffman:

No, they are earning up to a full year of university credit while they are in high school. And that allows them, then, to come into the university and complete a degree in three years, which is a cost savings.

Annalies Corbin:

It's huge.

Lisa Huffman:

And universities are expensive. University of Cincinnati is not at any extreme on that metric, but it's not, it's not inexpensive. And as more people go to college and as the world gets more expensive, that can become prohibitive. So, we are opening doors. Access is my number one priority. I want more people in the sphere of education, especially higher education, that's post-secondary education, that's my world. But they get to do this in high school in a supportive environment, bring that into the university and accelerate through the bachelor's degree, which gets them out in the workforce earlier, earning that income that is going to help them economically provide for their future, their families, build their community. It's an economic driver for a community to have an educated workforce that can meet the needs of what that city region needs.

And then, what's even more interesting is my information technology school, they can actually accelerate right into a master's and get their bachelor's and master's degree in four years. And just a seamless path starting in the workforce at a different level, not economically, but moving forward. And all of that is problem-based, project-based, real-world solution-based. So that when they graduate, we don't have employers going, "But that's not what I needed. You have to remediate my skill." No, they need to leave us ready to join them, day one ready to be a contributing member for what that business is.

Annalies Corbin:

And you ultimately want and you have industries fighting to get those graduates.

Lisa Huffman:

We do, yeah.

Annalies Corbin:

That is a huge win for everybody. It's a huge win for the university, obviously, but it's a

huge win for that graduate because they are highly desirable employees. And for those companies, to your point, it's worth what I have to pay to get that level of experience right from day one.

Lisa Huffman:

Right. They're saving money in the long run because they're not going back.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely.

Lisa Huffman:

And then, you know, so the company wins. Remember, I love a super win-win. The company wins. Our student wins because they're going to get that job. But then, we've changed their trajectory of their life and their generations after based on this experience. So, they win. And, of course, education, universities, and colleges win because that's our graduate out there partnering with industry in a way that helps us celebrate the work.

So, it really is that win-win. Everybody has a space in there. And it's organizations like your own, opportunities like that, that really let us pilot, try. I mean, that is the R&D phase. We've got to try something. "Oh, that works," "Nope." What's that challenge? How do we come together, solve it, and try it again? And then, we're modeling that for our K-12 students because that is the workplace today.

Annalies Corbin:

And it's the work of the work, right? And that's what we need everybody to be comfortable with is understanding the work of the work. Absolutely. So, as we sort of wrap the conversation, I really want to sort of end on, what is next? I mean, as the University of Cincinnati thinks about this opportunity in the micro school space, tapping into the incredible programs across the university system that you have to offer, ultimately, what happens with things like this? What do we do as partners and institutions, right? And recognizing that there are many that came to this partnership to do that. What do we do with this body of knowledge and experience moving forward?

Lisa Huffman:

That's the question and the space we're sitting in now as a college and an institution. But how do we scale and take this broader and test it broader? Does it just work in this situation? Or can it work in many different contexts? But then, in our own unique space in our college, the College of Education, Criminal Justice, Human Services and Information Technology, on the surface, why do those all go together? For me, they're foundational to strong, sustainable communities.

Annalies Corbin:

They're about humanity.

Lisa Huffman:

You've got to have good schools. No business or person wants to live where there aren't good schools, K-12, university. Got to be safe. Human services is mental health and physical health. And then, today, we have to have access to information, to solve problems, way find, create new knowledge. They go together. So, we're in this unique space right now, and we almost have our own micro school at college. What are those big problems? How do we stop this problem? How do we fix that problem of society or of our communities? And how do we work together across lines?

I think we've been so siloed. There's no silo anymore. We have to come together to solve problems. And this work here in this partnership, really, is like a pilot for what our college can do, what our university can do. But the economic health of the State of Ohio rests on the shoulders, and particularly in Cincinnati, on the University of Cincinnati, how to create a workforce that can meet the needs today, tomorrow, and what we don't even know down the line.

And so, all of these efforts are really essential to us to make sure we're innovating, we're dreaming about what's next, and that we think about, in new ways, solving problems that we haven't yet even figured out. And so, we're so excited and proud of this partnership and the amazing team that makes it, brings it to life every day, for them diving deep into this work because it is the work of education.

I think we need to rethink and re-evaluate why we do what we do to make sure we're actually meeting the needs moving forward. Student success is at the core. It's my core. We just have to reevaluate how we do it.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. Lisa, thank you so much for taking time out of your day for joining us and sharing the work that the University of Cincinnati is engaging. We will make sure that we have information about the micro school, all the pieces and parts that we talked about today in the show notes. So, please reach out if you have questions, but we are ever so grateful for the time.

Lisa Huffman:

Thank you. Thank you for having us. We're really proud of the work we're doing and excited to see where it goes. Thank you.

Annalies Corbin:

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.