

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



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Episode #302

Amy Besida:

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How am I helping to develop this young person to be, you know, the human that they wanna be in this world? And I'm starting with, what are their interests and what are their assets and what are their needs and what resources or agency of my own can I use to help bring that in for them?

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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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 Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Amy Besida, a chief program officer of Embarc. So, Amy, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Amy Besida:

Thanks so much for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

I am very excited to have this conversation, but let's set a little bit of context for our listeners as we get started. Embarc is a school day experiential learning model that partners with educators, community organizations, and schools to reimagine how learning lives beyond the classroom. They coach teachers as experienced leaders, connect schools to the people and places that bring learning to life, and support whole school culture shift grounded in equity, emotional safety, and belonging. Through shared journeys and reflections, students move from invisible to fully seen, and educators move from isolation to co-creation.

And all of that, for our listeners, it's pretty obvious why I'm super excited to talk with Amy because all of that sounds so wickedly familiar. So, champion the idea of organizations out there doing this work in the world. So, Amy, let's sort of start with the hundred-thousand-foot view. Outside of that description, tell us a little bit about the origin story of Embarc. You're based in Chicago. So, share a little bit with us.

Amy Besida:

We have a beautiful origin story. You know, the organization celebrated its 15-year anniversary last year. And so, it was started by two teachers at Harper High School that were commuting to school in the car together every day, talking about their students. And if people know Chicago, they know that we are an amazing city, a rich, diverse city, all kinds of cultures, and we're a city of neighborhoods. And so, our schools are embedded in those neighborhoods.

And what our founders originally saw from their classrooms was that their students really weren't weaving, not just the walls of school during the school day, but weren't weaving the boundaries of their neighborhoods as part of their life. And so, they were really curious about, "Well, what would happen if we kind of broadened our students' worldview?" And Harper High School has a rich history in Chicago, and a lot of people have heard the stories about the challenges that that school has went through as well. They were featured on a This American Life podcast, a two-parter about that. And so, there was a lot going on in that school, and there was students that were just ready to experience all the world had to offer. And the school was getting different resources. And so, our two founders thought, "Why not give this a try?"

And so, it started as just taking their students outside the classroom. A brand new Whole Foods had opened for the first time in Englewood on the south side of Chicago, and they said, "Well, let's start there. We'll take our students there." And so, they started really small like that. And then, from there, just started developing relationships with all of the amazing businesses and cultural institutions. And I mean, it's Chicago, we've got it all, so-

Annalies Corbin:

It's a perfect place to learn, right? The entire community, the city, like all of it.

Amy Besida:

Yeah.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah.

Amy Besida:

So, once they started forming those partnerships, then it just grew and grew, and they started connecting. It really was a teacher movement because they started connecting with teachers at other schools that were part of their network in Chicago. And when they heard about what they were doing, they were like, "Well, I want that for my students." And so, all of those, kind of, initial adopters became the Embarc team.

And then, from there, it grew beyond just what was primarily an afterschool program, like gathering students to do things, to a full school day program. We now have two different models that we run, one of which is a credit-bearing class in many of our schools. And so, it's really taken shape over the years.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. It sounds absolutely amazing. I can't wait to come for a visit. I will actually make that happen. So, really excited about it. One of the things that I really... Well, several things, but the thing that I think resonates the most with me is the recognition around the community impact on what's going on at the school with the program, obviously with the participants. And we talk a lot on this show, and most of my listeners are well aware that as an anthropologist, culture and culture shift and understanding culture change is one of the really critical elements of the work that we do and why we collectively do this work. And so, I love that element. So, from that perspective, share with us just a little bit, maybe, the sort of day in the life of a student who's participating in an Embarc program.

Amy Besida:

Yeah, that's such a great question. I mean, a day in the life of a student, if they're in the Embarc class, that class is... I always said, and I guess I'm biased here, but I would've loved to have this class when I was in high school. Like, this is a time where embedded in the school day, you get to invest in yourself. This is not about achievement culture in school. This is about developing as a person, thinking about my identity, and who am I right now, and what does that mean in relation to the people that are in this class with me? What does it mean in relation to my school, my larger community, my family, and how are all those pieces beginning to shape the choices that I wanna make for myself and my life?

'Cause the ultimate goal here is that students really feel that agency that they have in their life and are able to mobilize that for themselves, and that those choices are founded on what are your values and what do you want for yourself, not something that someone else is imparting on you to believe, like, "This is what you should choose for your life."

So, students are taking a class where they're diving into that, and they're talking about their different values and how they've come to form them, and they're sharing those with their classmates. And then, on an experience day, which is what we call that when students are leaving the class to go do something out in the community, they're getting on a bus, they're getting a talk from their teacher about what to anticipate, what to expect, and then they're showing up in a brand-new space to learn, "Now that I know this about myself, what does that look and feel like in this space? And what do I notice and learn about the other people in this space, and what does that mean for the choices that I wanna make for myself in, in my life?"

And I think that, like, reflection is everything in life. If we're not reflecting, we're just kind of going through the motions. And so, embedded in everything that we do is this powerful practice of reflection and, you know, really helping teachers harness that and notice what's happening in the moments with their students, so that they can bring that all back both at the end of an experience to talk about it, but back into their school then to continue to process that and talk more about, "What did you learn about yourself by being put in this new experience? What new people did you experience, and what are you curious about their careers?" So, there's all those options of how you might think more broadly about your future because of all these new people and places that you're going, as well.

Annalies Corbin:

Which is fabulous. And we know that that is an incredible opportunity for kids to not just discover who they are and sort of what their contribution to the world will be but more importantly, they get to really struggle with the steps necessary to make that journey even possible. And there's just so much incredible learning that happens in that kind of space, which does get me to a question that I know the listeners will be thinking about because it always comes up when we talk about these really amazing and innovative ideas that turn into programs that then turn into massive impact. How do we measure what's happening there?

I'm not gonna say measure success 'cause that's not what this is about. And I argue all the time that we're traditionally measuring the wrong things anyway. But I love the opportunity to talk with programs that are so innovative and are so grounded in the community, and really based on this notion of agency and that learner-centered journey. So, how do you as both an organization and as a program, especially one that is an inflection point around scale, how do you decide first and foremost what to measure? What's the story that's being told and the data that supports it? And then, secondly, then how do you measure that?

Amy Besida:

This is such an important conversation in education right now because we are still so focused on this achievement culture-

Annalies Corbin:

Right

Amy Besida:

... that is students are screaming that this is not working for me. I mean, if you're here in Chicago, you're reading the reports out of the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research that's talking about the attendance crisis in Chicago Public Schools. And I just reread that report and sent it to folks to think about in my office 'cause one of the key things that they were pulling out in there is that students need to feel a sense of belonging in order to come to school, feel connected to school, feel connected to their teachers and peers.

And then, that gets really tough though 'cause how do you measure a person's human development in that way when I'm sitting here with you at the stage I am in my life, but if I'm experiencing new peoples and places, I'm going through a process myself, where I'm not... This is my first podcast, so like-

Annalies Corbin:

Yay.

Amy Besida:

... what will I take away from this that be different? And how do you measure that? So, what we've done is really dive into taking that research out of University of Chicago, which is really at the heart of what was the catalyst to start Embarc as well, and continuing on with the research that they put out there and the sense of belonging. And we've developed a survey that we give our students that measures some different areas that we've deemed are based on the research, like, this is what is showing that is helping students grow as people, helping them grow those durable skills. So, we're measuring things like growth mindset, belonging, relationships, exposure.

And it's been really incredible to look at that data because, you know, we're still a young organization. And so, now beginning to collect this data for several years now, we're starting to really see the impact of it that we can look at the dosage of an experience that students go on and say, like, if a student didn't go on any experiences, what does it mean for their... we call it elevate data. What does it mean for their elevate data? And we see that there isn't growth over the course of a year.

But we see if students go on just one experience, everything starts to move up. And by time then they've been through their entire high school experience, we see that that growth in those different areas is just like, it's amazing to look at what a student's sense of belonging is and how the relationships they formed in their school have been a catalyst to how they're feeling connected to their education.

Annalies Corbin:

And we see the exact same thing, right? The more we can get kids to actually try a thing out in the world, the greater the impact that it's going to have. So, we see the same things. But you're right. It's really difficult to get that into sort of tangible data that's super, super useful. We're doing a big research project here that's gone on for multiple years. We're getting ready to release. That is really all around student's identity formation, although we're collectively not really allowed to use the word identity anymore.

But politics aside, the reality of it is that's exactly what we're studying because we know that through a collective set of experiences in a traditional classroom, in our homes, in our communities that students, we come equipped with a whole set of levers, these paddles or these buttons, if you will. And they get turned on and off all the time in different sequences based on the things that kids are experiencing.

And so, we wanted to understand what are the mechanisms that force buttons to be turned off, in part because we wanted to know can we design around to prevent them from going off to begin with? And if they do go off, can we design mechanisms or opportunities for those buttons to be turned back on? And to your point, that's that connection, that's that curiosity, it's the innovation, it's the wonder, it's the hands-on, the tangible, the touching, the I'm off having that experience. And those growth metrics are pretty remarkable.

So, with all of that understanding in mind then, when you think about the work of designing or developing a new experience that you plug into your existing program, how do you think about that? What's important there?

Amy Besida:

So many things but I think that one thing to hone in on that connects to what you just said is that it's almost like in the space of education, we've forgotten about brain science and that the cognitive part of learning is the last step. Learning is inherently emotional. It is traveling through all the pathways of the brain. And so, we wanna create experiences that bring up emotion for students that we're not trying to eliminate all points of stress. We're trying to create healthy moments of stress because that's actually where we develop resilience.

So, how can a student step into a new space and be tasked with something in an interesting, creative, and supportive way? And a lot of that leans on this arc of an experience, which is we have a whole before, during, and after piece because we wanna make things predictable so that a student feels like... especially when we're talking about the students that we're working with here in Chicago, if they haven't left their neighborhood, then we wanna create enough predictability for you that you're willing to take that risk and get on the bus and go to that new place.

And so much of that starts with their educator too. I was a high school teacher myself. And when you are gonna be a high school teacher, you're really focused on your content delivery and being a content expert. And so, I think a lot of the professional development that we do on the Embarc side with teachers is really about peeling away that content side and just talking about the behaviors and the beliefs and the ways of being that we are with our students that helps to engage them in these moments, so that they can take risks and try things, and someone's there to sort of create that safety net for them.

So, the relationship that a teacher has with a student is so incredibly powerful. And it has the power to do so much good. And just like every relationship in life, it has the power to create challenges as well, too. So, how can we talk about that more as adults of how we're showing up together in spaces for students? Because that's a key part of how we're creating these experiences. We have a team at Embarc that is led by a former educator that is our director of experience design, and it's really helping a lot of people out there in the community that are not youth-facing. They're not-

Annalies Corbin:

Right. Right. Right.

Amy Besida:

They're not welcoming a bunch of 16-year-olds regularly into their space. And so, it is actually super unnerving for those adults. They're very anxious about it. What's it gonna be like to have all these teenagers show up? So, it's kind of a double-sided thing here, professional development with teachers, and also this development that we do with our partners to go through a cycle of creation.

And one of the things that I really love about the approach is we got a lot of great ideas. We have a lot of educators on our team. But when we go into a new experience, we talk, we partner, we talk with them first about, like, why do you wanna welcome youth into your space, and what would you hope that they get out of it? Because we want you to design something for students that you feel connected to and passionate about as well.

And so, we've seen incredible experiences come out of some of our corporate partners, where that is the least youth-welcoming type of a space and just incredibly creative and engaging and interesting experiences because it also starts with why do you wanna be here in this with the youth? What do you wanna bring to the table for them? And so, when we're co-creating in that way, I think that really shifts a lot of things.

Annalies Corbin:

It does. And we see absolutely the same thing. And it's fascinating, too, because I don't know about you, but certainly for us, there's been a lot of conversation with those community and business and industry partners around the ways that they can engage meaningfully in education in the community that ultimately is self-serving.

From the business and industry side, we collectively know, certainly in the US, that we have a workforce issue in this country in many ways. And one of the big issues that we have is, you know, we cannot fill our jobs with our people from our own communities. And while it's fine for people to move from community to community, that's great, it's changing perspectives and diversity in all communities when that happens but, also, we need a ready mechanism or pipeline.

And so, from a very selfish standpoint, the more business and industry that we can get to partner with us in educational settings, the greater opportunity students have to know what that place does because there's often a misunderstanding. "Oh, it's a bank," "Oh, it's a hospital," and that's what this means, but it means so much more than that.

And so, what we hear repeatedly from them is they want to engage in something that is beyond show and tell or write me a check to pay for my much desperately needed and justified new band uniforms or whatever that happens to be. But I wanna do something else, or I want to do something more. And I love the fact that you've deliberately worked with those people, those companies, those industries to create a true experience that's meaningful both inside and outside that organization. It's pretty rare.

Amy Besida:

It is. It's really incredible. I mean, I was just at one last week with a trading firm. And so, I think a lot of the students are kind of like "Uh, finance?"

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, yeah.

Amy Besida:

And the whole experience was created so accessibly off of this kind of model of like a sandwich shop.

Annalies Corbin:

All right. We need to hear more. Give us the details.

Amy Besida:

Yeah. So, like, what they had, some of the staff members acting as distributors, some of the staff members from the corporation acting as sort of store managers and guides. And then, they got each of the groups of students together in small teams, and they came up with an on-the-spot business plan for a sandwich shop. And then, a bunch of us, we're in there as customers, and they're promoting their sandwiches, we're buying it. And then, throughout the whole experience, the cost of the materials are changing, that they have to supply in order to keep their shop open. And all these different things are starting to change in the background, and then they're having to come together as a team and make decisions about, "Well, what do we do now? How do we keep our customer base? What do we change?"

And in the end, like it's this little bit of a competition, too. The students are trying to have the most successful sandwich shop. And they did such a wonderful job. I mean, the kids had fun, which is always like a great thing. And then, a lot of the reflection that was led then by the corporate partners that were running this, it was not just about what they do, but it was about what did you have to do in order to be successful as a team? And they all talked about that then in their own professional roles because everybody that was there from this corporation, they're different roles on staff. Some people are actually coders working on something. Some people are more on the finance side of something. And so, it really talked about those durable skills that you need in life in general to be on a team.

And then, part of every Embarc experience, too, is a meal. We always have lunch and break bread with whoever the partner is. And so, the students got to sit down and eat lunch with all the people that had participated in the day, too. And I joined one of the tables for lunch, and it was really, you know, interesting to be a part of the conversation 'cause it's just so easy for adults and kids to make assumptions about what an adult is and what a teenager or kid is. And then, once they get talking, it's like, well, one of the staff members, like, this is his first job out of college, and he just moved to Chicago to take it, and the kids were so curious about that. Like, "Oh, the transition. Like you graduated school?" So, beyond the experience they just had, now they're also making all these connections just with these people that they get to ask

questions and learn something from and take away that kind of human moment of who you are. And so it was just so cool to see that.

Annalies Corbin:

And so incredibly important, right? The opportunity to see people being authentic really helps with those kids back to that identity word again. Really helps them figure out who they are, who they wanna be, what they wanna do, what their contribution is going to be, all of those pieces and parts. So, I love that very, very much.

I'm also always mindful as we sort of wrap the conversation up to be recognizing that any time we embark on these transformational journeys, and however any individual wants to define that for themselves is fair, but it's a lot of work, and it's a lot of moving parts. And congratulations because the organization has persisted for 15 years. That's a huge milestone because so many don't make it that far. So, first and foremost, yay, that's amazing.

But what are you thinking about? As an organization, you're sitting in the world at this moment, but for all of these organizations that are successful, and I would say it's the same for us, today is awesome. It's great. We're doing incredible work in this moment. But I can promise you that all of these organizations are actually thinking three, five, 10, 15, 50 years down the road. So, what is it, as an organization, that you're struggling with thinking about or working on as it relates to what you think teaching, learning, and the experience of being a learner is going to be moving forward?

Amy Besida:

This is really hard work because education has not shifted much in this country since it has been formalized. And we just can't seem to get our ducks in a row around how to do that and invest in it. And so, it is wonderful that Embarc exists, so many organizations exist that are doing all this work to innovate in those spaces. But it's gonna require real policy change in education for that to be sustainable. And so, what does that look like? And I don't know.

And I think that becoming a part of the Ecosystem Lab with Education Reimagined is a step in the direction of how do we try to do that in collaboration with other organizations because it's easy to get negative and focus on all the challenges and deficits because there are just so many, but I remain really hopeful and positive about what's possible because I meet so many people through my work that are just so invested in doing this for the purpose solely of young people are it. You can be a parent, not a parent, or whatever, but kids are it. Kids are here in this world, and they are meant to be surrounded by a community of people that are there to support them. And education is one of the foundations of that outside of family.

I mean, you send your kid to school, that is a huge... you're asking a lot when you send your kid off to school. They're spending so much time away from you, engaging and learning with other people. So, I don't have the answers for that question that you asked, but what I can do is just say that we continue to look for the other people that are doing this work with us, side by side with us, and not look at it as a threat that there's other people out there doing good work in education, but that we can all do something to learn from and support each other and try to find ways to change the system in meaningful and sustainable ways.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. There is so much to do. Holy moly. There's room for everybody, right? Because there's a lot of work to do. So, I appreciate that very much. So, our last, sort of, uh, question, I guess, if you will, so if folks are listening, they're super interested, and they're like, "Well, how does Embarc come to my school?" or, "How can I take elements of Embarc and make them my own, because Embarc's not gonna be able, you know, to come to my school?" what advice do you have for folks as they wrestle with trying to take some of these ideas and really incorporate them into their day-to-day practice and experience for students?

Amy Besida:

I think, it starts with, how are you uncovering what your students' interests, assets, and needs are? And then, how might you take a look around your immediate community and make some connections to those assets and interests and ask, and reach out and ask. Like, you wouldn't believe how many people there are in small pockets of businesses and different interesting organizations that if you just reach out and talk about, "Here's what I'm doing, and here's how I'm looking for support," like, people want to.

So, I think it's a matter of, you know. And it's hard, 'cause when you're an educator, you have so many things that are a part of what you're doing but if you're putting your students at the center, and we're taking a step back from just achievement culture and thinking about how am I helping to develop this young person to be the human that they wanna be in this world, and I'm starting with what are their interests and what are their assets and what are their needs, and what resources or agency of my own can I use to help bring that in for them?

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I appreciate that so much. Amy, I wanna thank you very much for taking time out of your day to join us to share the story of what's happening with Embarc and your own influence and passions for it on a day-to-day basis. So, we really appreciate it. We will have in the show notes for our listeners links, contact, so

you can get more information about Embarc. You can reach out to Amy. And I hope that you will. It's really incredible things that are happening in Chicago. So, thank you so much, Amy, for joining us today.

Amy Besida:

Thank you. Thank you so much. This was fun.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely.

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