

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed

Episode #296

Belén Quellet:



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Parents' fear has to be addressed as well, because they feel that the educational journey they had worked for them. So, that's what I have that I can give to my son or daughter. But the world has changed. So, what if we're not looking for that corner office anymore? What if success looks completely different?

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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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 me today is Belén Quellet, Executive Director of The Learning Quest.

Belén Quellet:

Belén. Hello.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Belén Quellet:

Thank you. Thank you so much for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

We are so excited to have this conversation and so happy to have you back with us, so to speak. So, let's set some context for our listeners as we get started. The Learning Quest is a learning ecosystem in Falls Church, Virginia, dedicated to developing innovative approaches and tools through research and hands-on program implementation. It actively engages learners as collaborators, valuing their insights to

help shape an education system that is relevant, adaptable, and genuinely learner-centered. So, important to us all.

They're also committed to empowering individuals to thrive in an ever-evolving world, and the Learning Quest fosters a culture of curiosity, exploration, and STEM enthusiasm, while prioritizing community outreach and real-world impact. And there's just so much more.

So, Belén, thank you for joining us. And let's start with the 100,000-foot view, because everybody who really digs in, spends time, energy, and effort, and says, "Hey, I'm going to do a learning ecosystem," for starters, huge, huge lift, right? But it takes a lot of time, energy, and dedication. So, despite the sort of introductory, "Hey, this is what it is," let's really ask you, why this thing and why now?

Belén Quellet:

It's a good question. Why now? I think it should have been yesterday or years ago. But Falls Church is a very small city. It's about 14,000 people. It has one high school, one elementary school. So, I feel it's a great place to promote this open-world kind of education for everybody. I crossed paths with Education Reimagined, so it was like, "Oh, I get it. This is what I want to do here."

So, what we're looking at is I started working at a collaboration with Acton Academy in Falls Church, which is learner-centered and learner-driven. And that gave me the tip of, "Okay, we can do this in the whole city. We don't have to be at a school to learn. We can do this around the city." And there's so many businesses around the city. So, it just felt right. And while we've been trying to do this for like two to three years now, we're tapping into repair as a way in to bring community together.

So, we've hosted two teddy bear fix-it clinics, one at a park, one at the farmers market, kind of letting people know that this can be done, and it's not just about repairing a teddy bear, it's about what happens to teddy bears. Why do they all end up in landfills? And so, we're looking at repair as a way into this open-world learning ecosystem building.

Annalies Corbin:

And I really love that. And some of the synergies that we have with what's happening with the Learning Quest is this idea of taking an entire city and turning it into a place of learning, right? So, the PAST Foundation in partnership with the Columbus Foundation and 13 other community partners have all come together around doing that same way of thinking. All the implementations around the country are different, right? They're unique to our communities and the needs of our communities. But I love this thing that we have in common that says, "Hey, there is not a space in our city where learning can't nor should happen."

So, let's talk about a little bit of the nuts and bolts, because those are the things that people are always really curious about. So, first and foremost, is what's going on there. How does it interact with the sort of state requirements for education that moves students forward? So, is this thing accredited? Is it a loose affiliation? Is it a school? Is it kind of more homeschool-like? So, help our listeners really understand the context in which the Learning Quest works in your community.

Belen Quellet:

So, what we're trying to do is connect the community, but already using the connections that are out there because there's the internships that all nonprofits have with students. There's the city council that has internships with them as well. There's the Business and Education Foundation, which gathers businesses around, how could they better support learners? There's the Chamber of Commerce. There's the Falls Church Education Foundation. There's the local library. So, what I'm trying to do is tap those connections and improve them.

Like, I'm a member at the board of the Chamber of Commerce. What happens there is there is a student that sits on the board meetings. While I think that was an innovative program for learners to join boards to see, take a seat at the table and see how decisions are made, all they see right now is motion to approve, a second, and nothing really happens there. So, what I'm trying to do is twist, give a twist to the existing programming, but change it a little bit that's more learner-centered, gives them a sense of exploration and find out what they can really do.

So, for the Chamber of Commerce and the Business Education Foundation, I'm proposing different initiatives. So, we have the Nexus Initiative, which is, what if learners could become your focus group, and they look at the city has a pedestrian plan and a bicycle plan. What if they look at it? If they cross both and give you feedback on what does it look like? Because they're not together. They're different. So, they're going in different paths. So, I'm trying to elevate their input into improving the community.

The other thing the city has is a recycling app. What if they become the focus group and give you feedback on how it actually works? So, I want them not just to sit at the table but be able to make these decisions and find out how things work. That's why we're tapping into repair as well because that leads them on, how do things work?

Annalies Corbin:

But the students... and I really do love that. And we think about the same way, right? You know, I always laugh. I tell people who come to the PAST Innovation Lab, you know, which is an R&D prototyping facility by design, right? I said, "You know, the kids here, I would put them up against any R&D team in the world, "right? And for the same reasons as you. And it's not because they're always going to have the right answer,

the right idea, the right solution but because those learners were central to coming up with understanding, evaluating and posing possibilities, right? There's so much power in that, not just the learning that happens, the tangible learning but the exponential learning that will follow them a lifetime from having had that experience.

So, to your point, right, it's great to be on a board because there's a lot of process to a board. But if you don't really understand how and why a board comes to the decisions that it does, you're really not going to understand the board as anything other than a processor. And that's not exactly what it is, right?

So, I thank you so much for that because it's wonderful. But just to clarify then, so the students that are participating with the Learning Quest, they're still students someplace else in addition to.

Belén Quellet:

Correct.

Annalies Corbin:

So, this is really that bridge between their formal K-12 and their community and the opportunity to learn outside of the traditional setting of whatever their educational journey happens to be, correct?

Belén Quellet:

Yes, correct. So, we're still in the making, but we're not just doing Falls Church while I'm focused there.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah.

Belén Quellet:

There's, in Alexandria, right next door to us, there's a learning pod that has two micro schools and an after-school programming for youth. So, we're working with them as well.

So, one of the other initiatives is we've got, kind of, many initiatives that are under the umbrella of a learning ecosystem but we're trying to create a tool lending library, a library of things, then the Teddy Bear Fix-it Clinic, the Nexus program. So, it's like out there for curiosity.

One more initiative we have is the education passport, which might change its name but it's like what if you could go explore any business, what would you like to learn from a business? So, what if you could go to a repair place and find out how you can do a hole in a belt? What if you walk into a coffee shop, and they have a class on doing art latte? So, what if we could come up with all the businesses and be, instead

of a food truck or, you know, how there's a wine passport or restaurants have this passport that you can go and eat, what if any learner, any age could go in and learn something about a business? So, we're developing that as well.

Annalies Corbin:

That's really wonderful. And I think to go with that then is also... and this is one of the things we talk about a lot in our, sort of, ecosystem cohorts in the work through Ed Reimagined is, how do we, in addition to those pieces and parts, how do we take all of those experiences that our learners have, those non-traditional, not sitting at a desk, not sitting in a traditional classroom and recognize that that time spent on task, on learning, on exploring, on being curious, should count towards the end goal of what I learned?

So, I'm curious, how are you at Learning Quest and Falls Church, in particular, collaboratively trying to figure out how do we give kids credit for all of this stuff? Or do we, right? Every community's wrestling with this and it's not pretty, it's not a pretty conversation and it's not cohesive nor is it consistent. So, help us understand how your community is wrestling with this question.

Belén Quellet:

We're still working through that question, exactly, because there is no one answer that fits all, and there's not an answer that is enough for parents or teachers or school boards. So, we're still having that conversation to figure it out.

But I think this conversation is tied to the future work. Last time, I talked to a Google recruiter, they said, we know some of that comes in will only last two years because they're going to move on. So, we're not looking at the metal of 45 years of service anymore. And HR is not looking anymore at these resumes that have people moving in from one job to the other very quickly as a bad thing, because that's what's going to happen. So, if we work as a GPS that we keep reinventing ourselves in the future of work, then we should bring that down to schools.

And I remember, I was there when your researchers talked about the research they're doing, and I asked them, "When do you think this tip of the iceberg, because you're right there, when do you think it's gonna flip and show all of this?" And they said, that's a good question, but we don't know. So, I'm guessing everything we are doing around the country is going to eventually turn over. And it's going to be so clear that there's not going to be a debate anymore.

Annalies Corbin:

And what a joyous day that will be, right? Oh, my goodness. Yeah. Because we're wrestling with this very thing, too, right? How do we ensure that we honor the learner's journey? You know, it's interesting because we're advocating for collectively,

and it's not just you and I, but we're seeing this start to happen at schools all over the country. And yay, it's such a celebration, this idea of allowing agency for students in ways we've never really, really embraced in traditional education before.

So, to get those learners have a say in what they learn and how they learn it, and we know that the generation of learners that we're working with right now and those that are coming, you know, if they can't figure out what it has to do with them, they're more disengaged than ever. And it's not because they don't wanna learn. It's because the system isn't keeping up with the way they learn as a generation of individuals.

And so, the ability to allow those learners to go off and have those experiences, and explore, and then bring them back into their mainstream education is going to be critically important for the long-term viability of our educational system. You know, the hope is that it really lets go of the one-size-fits-all notion, and it becomes incredibly adaptable, but you and I both know that's going to take some time.

But this flip that you're talking about, and I love the way you described that, that's going to be the metric by which we see that progress actually happening for our learners. And I'm really curious that when you think about this in your community, what do you feel like is one of the biggest or primary elements that has to happen at that community level for that flip to happen for you?

Belén Quellet:

I think they have to be seen, but for that, it's the adult role to give them this space, not just sit at the table, but let them showcase what they're doing. I think children are naturally curious, but at one point, we, the adults, come in and say, "You can't tie your shoelaces because you don't know how to. Let me do it for you." And that showing them is actually... I mean, I taught at a Montessori studio, three to six years old. They're so curious and they're so engaged. And it's like, "Okay, it's time for work and you choose your work." So, why do we cut that off?

Annalies Corbin:

Why do we cut that off?

Belén Quellet:

Why do we do that? I don't know. And then, I think parents' fear has to be addressed as well because they feel that the educational journey they had worked for them. So, that's what I have that I can give to my son or daughter, but the world has changed. So, what if we're not looking for that corner office anymore? What if success looks completely different? And we don't know what job they're going to have, and they're going to have multiple jobs.

So, these 21 century skills that we don't know what they are, maybe they do know. But I'm also aiming for all of us that are working on these learning ecosystems, where are their learners' voices? Where are they? Because I was in Ohio. And where are those students that were able to choose their own path, their learning journey? Where are they? I wanna hear about them. So, I think we have to give them, not a place at a table, but put them behind the microphone and listen to what they have to say. How did that work for them?

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, that student voice is absolutely critical. And we have to pay attention, right? Because it's really interesting. You know, if Google is telling you, you know, we don't expect our employees to come and stay more than two years, and we don't really care honestly about their resume, truth be told, what we care about, people are showing up here curious, want to know some stuff, want to roll up their sleeves and try some things, right? That's essentially what they're talking to you about.

And because that shift in the way that we think about the world of work happens, it's going to directly translate on the way that students prep themselves for the experiences that they are looking for. And how can we help them figure out that path or that journey forward? Because we have to stop quantifying for them what we think it should be.

Belen Quellet:

Exactly. I agree, totally. And I think it goes back a little bit to when old people had a trade. They didn't necessarily have an education, but they had a trade. So, that had a value and they learned it out there, being out there. So, when did we think that putting them in a classroom was gonna make that better? And when did we think that there's one size fits all. So, I'm still thinking out loud about all of these things.

Annalies Corbin:

Well, and it's really important work. So, let's go back to the learner. So, share with us, because you've had several initiatives now, you've got learners fully engaged with what's happening, and you got the community trying to figure out, "Oh, my gosh, what's this Learning Quest thing and what does it have to do with us, in our community?" So, share with us, if you would, a story or two about, sort of, your learners' experiences.

Belen Quellet:

So, they joined, a few, we have a few learners that joined one of the teddy bear fix-it clinics, and then we, Learning Quest, partnered with Repair Cafe Fairfax. And they have repair cafes where people come together with the expertise just to fix things for free for others, anything from electronics to a chair, to sharpening a knife.

So, the students came in to also learn how things work. So, with this partnership, what we're doing is when we put the layout out, now we have snap circuits, and now, I bought from Fix-it Clinics from LA a repair kit which is something you can repair. It's broken by engineers, so you can repair it. So, what we're trying to do is this becomes the door to "how do things work?" It's not about the stitching, it's not about the fixing, but it's about that you are curious enough to see how things work. So, these students from high school are going to volunteer in the future events we have in order to tap into that.

But this, the education passport Initiative, while I can design it and talk to businesses, which I have, saying, "Hey, what if a student could come in here and learn something, what would that be? I want it to be co-designed." So, now that it's in the hands of volunteers, learners at Meridian High School, so that they can ask around, "Hey, what would you like to learn if you were able to walk into a business and find out something about it?" So, it's more of an exploration passport, but every time I talk about it, sometimes, I say, "Oh, so that's for people that don't want to go to college." It's like, no, that's for everybody because if a learner can become a lifelong learner, then he or she is set.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And they're curious. And I love the idea that you're tapping into that, "How does something work?" because it's interesting, right? You know, with kids so plugged into automations, to video games, to screens, to things like that, we see a generation that's hesitant to go outside and explore, right? And that's a very generalization. You know, we've got lots of kids that love to do that sort of stuff. But we see more kids, I think, today that when you say, "Hey, I need you to go do x, y, or z," something out there in the world, they don't know how to, one, do that thing because they've never experienced it, but more importantly, they sometimes can't figure out how to figure out how to do that thing.

So, it's the thinking behind, how do I problem-solve? I don't know how either something works or how to do a thing. How could I step myself into figuring it out for myself? We are seeing, as educators, a real disconnect in that level of skill, right? And I think your point is a really good one. Little kids, that sort of three to five or six year olds, before we really get kids into formal education, they're super curious. They're exploring, they're playing, they're imagining, they've got their imaginary friends, they're playing games, they're role-playing. Those are all the skills that are innate to becoming human. And our littlest learners are just doing it because, honestly, we haven't tapped it out of them yet.

And yet, when we get additional education, we start to see that natural curiosity and problem solving for myself, like, don't do this, don't help me. You know, little kids, "No, no, no, don't help me," it goes away.

Belén Quellet:

It's messy.

Annalies Corbin:

It is. It's messy. Yeah. But I would also argue that one of the reasons it's going away is because, to your point about the tying the shoes example, we are demonstrating and showing them we're not letting them struggle with the figuring out. And what you're talking about is embracing the "I need to know how."

Belén Quellet:

Yes. And the layers of sustainability that comes in because right now, something doesn't work, I'll buy something new. So, I don't need to know how things work.

Annalies Corbin:

And I don't need to know how to fix it because I'm just going to go buy a new one, especially since the manufacturing process has gotten relatively cheap. Although that's changing a little bit with the economy and the political landscape that we're in in the US right now, things are not as inexpensive as they used to be, but it did create this habit, "I don't have to fix it. I'll just go buy a new one."

Belén Quellet:

That's why I loved your layout when I walked into your foundation because you could see the car and what it looks like inside. Nobody gets to do that like, "Oh, I have to open up the hood. And where would I do that? You're not gonna go near that." And then, the fact that you have the design space before the maker space. So, you got to think about what you want to go do before you get it hands-on. So, the process is, I think, it's not about the outcome. It's about how you approach a problem. Exactly.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, exactly. So, I'm also curious then, as you sort of think about the next six months to a year, so you're inside now an Education Reimagined ecosystem lab, you're part of cohort number two doing this work. And we went through cohort one, and again, so much that you can learn from that experience. But for you, what is paramount for you and the work that you're doing in your community for you to move from the moment you are right now to what you think you need to be, sort of that one year down the road?

So, I'm super curious because we have a lot of people who listen, who are in the midst of doing something new, doing something different, and even if it's only in their

classroom, it's not even yet in their communities, and the struggle I hear repeatedly is getting started, and then knowing what or how to do the next thing is really, really difficult. So, you're brave, you opt into this thing, right? And so, I'm curious about for you, what is it that you feel like you either can, will, or should get out of this experience that's going to be tangible on the ground for you?

Belén Quellet:

I think it's all about weaving into a fiber that is all around the community, but I can't do it without learners. That's why it's taking more time because they're very busy. The school here has an IB program, International Baccalaureate, so they're like all over the place with that. And once they reach junior year, it's all about, what college am I going to go to? So, I'm tapping into earlier, and I'm talking to other actors as well. Virginia Tech has a workshop for fifth graders to figure out what part of STEM do they like. So, it's like, is it out there?

So, my work is basically taking time, but it's this weaving that if that is done, then the fabric is not going to rip apart. But there's a lot of different actors here in Falls Church and the US in general that do a lot of things like volunteering, or mending circle, or the repair cafe, or something else, or the senior center and their expertise. What if we all come together? So, what I'm doing is gently stitching the community with all its resources. So, it's basically a lot of time but it's bringing out. They can do so much more with what they already have. So, I feel the foundations are there. I just need to help it – I don't know – grow.

Annalies Corbin:

You know, what you're describing to me – put my anthropology hat on, right? So, that's old-fashioned quilt making.

Belén Quellet:

Yes.

Annalies corbin:

You know, old-fashioned quilt making was a community endeavor.

Belén Quellet:

Correct.

Annalies Corbin:

Everybody participated in one form or another. It was largely gender based, but that's neither here nor there. But the premise was that all the families, everybody had somebody there that was representing whoever they happen to be in the crafting of this annual quilt. It was a really common, sort of, phenomenon.

Belén Quellet:

Yes. It's beyond square.

Annalies Corbin:

Yes.

Belén Quellet:

Right? So, it's the vision that will bring people together. That's what I thought.

Annalies Corbin:

I really really love that. I think the metaphor of the quilt or the ... you know, because you keep using the stitching together, so it just really sort of drove me there but I really think that that's a beautiful way to think about it because it's a tapestry that's flexible. And I love the idea, it's beyond the square. You know, you have to meet up with something else or it just doesn't work.

Belén Quellet:

Yes.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, that's really amazing. You know, as we sort of wrap the conversation and sort of the thinking about the pieces and parts, I'm super curious, when you talk to your learners, because you're really plugged in with what they're saying, what they're looking for, what they're interested in, what do you see as some of the primary aspirations that are, sort of, being woven through your community that lots of folks aren't recognizing? Because I suspect you're seeing those things.

Belén Quellet:

What I see is they don't have a voice. And when they do talk, they don't think they're loud enough. So, I think they still feel, like these learners that I see at the Chamber of Commerce and the board meetings, they're there, but they're shy, and they're not supposed to be. So, I feel they need to be more brave and speak up. And it's not just about leadership. It's not about those people that are going to actually make it off the charts. It's about everybody.

So, what I feel is that they don't think they know enough, but we were the ones that first cut their curiosity. So, it's like, "No, it's exactly the point. We need you to help us move forward on how to. Not the goal of know-it-all."

Annalies Corbin:

How are you going to help them grow that skill? How are you, as an individual, and then, how are you as an organization within the community, how do you help kids grow that skill? Because I think you're right. On the one hand, kids are super brave,

right? They love their autonomy. But on the other hand, when you put them in uncomfortable or unfamiliar situations, we all have seen it, a kid will shrink.

Belén Quellet:

Yes, but I think what we're missing, the part that adults have to do is the active listening because when they first say something, we'll go, "Oh, no, no, no, we did that already." It's like, "Keep it coming, keep it coming." So, we should be more gentle in the sense that if we were in that place once and we should be elevating each other.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. I agree with that. As we wrap our conversation then, for those folks that are out listening, hearing you talk about the beginning of what's going to be an epic journey, no doubt in the community, it's already made great strides, but people struggle to get started. It's not easy what we're talking about doing. It's really saying and acknowledging what's happening in the world of education isn't working for our learners. And we, as adults, talking about bravery here, we have to be brave enough (A), to stand up and say, first and foremost, it's not working; and (B,) I want to try something different. But it's not always easy to do that.

Belén Quellet:

It's not.

Annalies Corbin:

So what do you suggest?

Belén Quellet:

It's a good question, but I think we're also very defensive. My take was every time I start talking to someone, it's like, "Oh, no. But we're doing it right." It's like, "I mean, it's okay. There's always room for improvement. So, what if we come in all of the community, maybe there's something else we can do. Can we tap into it and make it better?" But I think fear, in all of its senses, has to be addressed. Maybe to parents themselves, because the school community, parents are looking for the best place for the child, but the whole community can be that place. So, I do think that we're not talking to parents enough.

Annalies Corbin:

I think that's an interesting point. And we all come from the lens, I think, it's just human nature that says, "Hey, well, you know, I managed to get through school. It was fine for me. So, I mean, why does it need to be different for my kid today?" And it is an interesting conversation. And it doesn't matter where I go in the world, I bump up against this over and over again. It doesn't matter what culture, what language, you know, there's this commonality to, "Hey, it worked for me. Why do we need to invest time, energy, and effort in it being different for my kid?"

And it's not because parents don't want what's best for their kids. It's because it's really difficult to understand a journey that you're talking about that I could never even imagine, much less had the opportunity to live through. And so, there's that odd disconnect.

Belén Quellet:

It is. I agree with what you're saying, but also it has to do with trust. What do you trust? You trust what you know, not what you don't know. So, how do you place trust on your children's education if you don't know what it's gonna be? And then, imagine using the words "education revolution." It's like, oh, no, no, no, no, no, that's too much. But that's what it takes. So, I'm hoping that the research you guys are on, the iceberg will tip and show everything that's underneath and make it oh so clear for everybody.

Annalies Corbin:

Well, I hope you're right. And just for our listeners the research that Belén is making reference to is, we've been studying for the last four and a half years the idea of when and how students turn their engagement on and off. We refer to it as STEM identity, but it's really much more than that, right? It's this idea of students going out in the world and finding themselves, finding what they love and figuring out how they can use the combination of those attributes to make a contribution into the world.

You know, kids aspire to be whole citizens, right? Fully engaged and meaningful and happy and loved. And that's what we're collectively working towards. But we know that it's easy for kids to get turned on and to get turned off. And sometimes, turning them back on is really difficult. And what we recognized is we need to really understand why and how the turning off happens. And rather than trying to turn it back on all the time, what if we could prevent it from going off to begin with?

Belén Quellet:

It's fantastic.

Annalies Corbin:

That's the work.

Belén Quellet:

Yes, that's the work.

Annalies Corbin:

And it's coming out soon. I think we're within about, you know, four to six months fully, right, to being able to release that work. It's not going to be the end all and be all, but we're going to put out into the world, "Hey, this is what we found." And so, I'm excited about that with you. So, thank you for that.

Belén Quellet:

I'm looking forward to that.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. Belén, I want to thank you so much for taking time out of your day to come and chat with us about the Learning Quest and to really help us understand what's happening on the ground, in the community, and what Virginia's thinking about all this. So thank you so much for joining us today.

Belén Quellet:

Thank you so much for having me and it was a pleasure to visit the PAST Foundation.

Annalies Corbin:

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 re-imagine education.