

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #307

Garrett Smiley:

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Education's not a content problem. It's instead about convincing kids that this is worth their time, that it's important, that it's meaningful, motivating students, showing them how learning connects to what they care about in the real world.

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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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 am super excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Garrett Smiley, founder and CEO of the Sora Schools. So Garrett, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Garrett Smiley:

Thanks for having me. This will be fun.

Annalies Corbin:

I am really excited to have this conversation. Let's set a bit of context for our listeners as we get started. Sora Schools is an online middle and high school dedicated to delivering a transformative learning experience that empowers students to thrive in the modern world. Through live interactive classes and flexible independent learning, Sora is expanding across to high-quality interdisciplinary project-based education for students across 48 states and 17 countries.

So, super busy is what that means and super excited to have the conversation. And because you are also a founder, my listeners know that I love talking to founders. I always like to start with the big giant question that is, what were you thinking?

Because starting new things is really hard. So, let's start with the sort of the why, Garrett. Why this thing and why now?

Garrett Smiley:

Yeah, great question. It does require a bit of naivete and a little dash of craziness, so I resonate with that.

Annalies Corbin:

For sure, for sure.

Garrett Smiley:

I came to this role from a bit of a different perspective. I was, as a student, a military brat, so I bounced around a lot of different schools from hippie schools in Seattle, to deep Texas religious schools and everything in between, including online. So, I got an interesting overview of the different options.

But I went to high school in the early 2010s. So, yes, I'm a youngster. I don't think there's video here, but my face does betray the fact that I'm a youngster. So, I went to school at this interesting time when the internet was entering the classroom, and YouTube and Khan Academy and Coursera and all these tools that we're familiar with now hit the mainstream. And it was just, to make a long story short, shocking to me that we now had access to all these amazing tools, but my teachers still got up in front of the class and lectured just like they'd done and, in some cases, for 40-plus years, right?

Annalies Corbin:

Right.

Garrett Smiley:

And teachers are still a super, super important part of the equation. But even as a young person, seeing all different schools making, from my perspective, the same mistakes, what are we doing here? Because you would suspect that with this amazing explosion of possibilities that students would become more and more educated and passionate and all. But what we saw even back then and has played out now is, it's not helping. It's actually we're seeing satisfaction, we're seeing test scores, we're seeing basically anything that you can articulate that matters in education, we're seeing go down over the last 15 years. So, why is this?

And if you believe education's a content problem, if you believe it's just matching kids with the right textbooks and learning and Harvard lectures and all these things, we should have seen the opposite, right? But as a young person, I realized that's clearly

not the case. Education's not a content problem. It's instead about convincing kids that this is worth their time, that it's important, that it's meaningful, motivating students, showing them how learning connects to what they care about in the real world, their identity, emerging worldview, right? This is how you get students to the table and excited to use these tools.

So, anyway, that was my deep feeling as a student, but I thought, "Okay, as long as I get into a top school, they'll have it figured out for university." So, I went to Georgia Tech. I studied computer science, mechanical engineering. I was a nerdy STEM kid. So, I got a good dose of that at what's ostensibly a top school in those domains. But they were also very confused about pedagogically and about the role of technology and how we should be using these tools.

So, I was just fed up. I'm like, "Okay. Clearly, no one's doing it," and I have increasingly strong ideas about how to build learning experiences, connect to the real world with projects to inspire and ignite that curiosity in kids. So, started with just a nonprofit, working to make boring things like financial literacy and life skills interesting, and especially for foster kids in marginalized communities who need that sort of support, and it worked well.

So, I said, "Screw it. We're gonna do a whole school in this flavor." And seven years later now, we're very, very proud of what we've built.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. And as you should, because again, starting things is really hard, right? And the other thing I love about talking to founders, we always start with the thing that we know or the thing that we have the most tangible opportunity to dig in, touch, feel, share out. We always do that, right? It's innate to who we are. And I think that's part of the reason why founders, they go all in, they're super passionate, "I care about this thing so deeply," or "It's so meaningful to me," or "I've got a living example," so on and so forth. And so, I think that's important.

And I also think that, as you were explaining sort of your why, what's really clear to me is the recognition and the understanding that students desperately, desperately need what they're learning to matter to them, right? And because you start with that nugget as the core, then that's where the potential is going to lie.

So, let's talk a little bit, Garrett, then, about the thing started, it's off and running, and now you're doing school. So, let's talk a little bit about what makes a Sora School different. I get that it's online, but there's more to it than that. There's that community

connection. There's the-world-is-the-classroom sort of approach. So, let's talk a little bit about that.

Garrett Smiley:

Yeah. We were one of the first online programs that said, "Online's not gonna define us." It is a delivery mechanism. It's a certain lifestyle that some families want, but that should not be the most important descriptor of a program. Whereas for the last 20-plus years, online school meant traditional, asynchronous, isolating. That's what online meant.

We said we're gonna take the best practices from schools that our founding team participated in or led or these project-based, interdisciplinary, mastery-based, these very innovative types of schools. We said we're gonna take all of that- And this is 2018, by the way. So, combine it with these latest tools like Zoom back then, cutting edge, and just do what the best companies in the world have been doing, which is using these tools to create online workplaces, right? And we're gonna create an online school just like that.

Annalies Corbin:

An actual ecosystem, not just an independent learner sitting someplace in isolation.

Garrett Smiley:

Exactly.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah.

Garrett Smiley:

All those things that we all know make up a great school, community, connection, relationship between peers and students and faculty between each other, those we prioritize from day one. We have to bring that into the online sphere. That was the priority.

So, online is just our starting point, but it was never gonna be our ending point. What we like about online is, yes, it's growing, homeschool is growing, all these things. It's a good place to start, but it forced us to focus on just the quality of the experience 'cause you can't hide behind fancy facilities and football fields and, it's like the distraction that colleges do. "Look at the the lazy river," right? "Oh, don't ask about our classes," right? "Look at the lazy river," right? We couldn't do that. So, just focusing online, getting off the ground this way was really good for us.

And now that we've done that, and I'll talk about our pedagogy in a second, but now that we've done that, private schools are coming to us, micro schools, even public schools is our fast-growing area, are coming to us and saying, "How do we bring the Sora school, the Sora program," what we've built, the curriculum, the software, the everything we've built over the last seven years to be the top-rated, online private school like we are, "how do we bring that to our communities?"

So, it's very exciting to see this engine we've built, this educational experience, this school in the cloud now get real-world manifestations in almost two dozen places around the world now.

Annalies Corbin:

Right. And I do love that, but I wanna dig in just a little bit because at the end of the day, and we're gonna talk about the actual way the program works, and I really do wanna dig into that, I'm super intrigued, but I also wanna recognize that at the end of the day we, we have... and I'm gonna shift at this moment to be very US-centric, and so apologize to my listeners from other parts of the world, but you can extrapolate from this into your own space.

So, we have an investment in public education, right? And in public education in a variety of ways, and it needs to change desperately. We know that. My listeners listen to me talk about that all the time. But I'm really curious about the things over the last seven years as you've built out Sora, and recognizing that Sora has honestly grabbed a hold of the freedom of the lack of constraints in many ways and turned that into a very cohesive learning environment.

So, I'm really curious about what elements of the success of Sora do you see that can have really, really tangible positive impacts on traditional public education to get it to move? Because it's obsolete. I talk about that all the time. It's a systems problem that is then having a direct reflection literally and figuratively back on the learners. So, before we get into the weeds about how Sora works, I'm really curious about how Sora can be a game changer for the bigger, broader systems that are at play that honestly need the tweak.

Garrett Smiley:

It's funny you mention that because this is our organizational priority over the last year and a half. We're very proud of what we built with the private schools. It's growing quickly. Tons of micro schools and pods and all these things being powered by the Sora private school. It's amazing.

But we're still a tuition-charging private school. So, even with ESAs to be US-centric, so even with these school vouchers, and especially in the South and it's making it more and more accessible, but we will never be able to, nor probably should we, try to replicate what public school stands for, right? Let's be cynical and say they stand for at least multi-trillion dollars of real estate assets, but to be a little more open than that, they are the backbones of many of their communities. They are the number one employer in some places. They provide so many social services and wraparound supports for communities. They're extremely important.

However, the message that we are bringing to the world now, the world of public education in the US, is you don't have to die on the hill of one academic choice, right? We can think of public schools more like universities where they provide different pathways. If you wanna be a computer science major in university or an interdisciplinary major or an arts major, we have these different pathways, but they're still validated, curated, controlled by the university.

So, I think about adolescents because that's what Sora focuses on, so middle and high school, why can't that be the same thing where we have maybe have a very traditional track, but let's have a Sora program next to it, and then let's have that next to an early college program. Let's have that next to a classical program. I don't care, right? Let's give different options to families and just set the standards and what quality looks like at the top. Be less dogmatic about process.

So, this is the story we're telling, and you'll be very happy to know that I've been traveling all across the country for the last two years sharing this message. This year, we've had a real breakthrough where so many, not only superintendents, but their school boards and then teachers unions are understanding that we need to think about offering innovation in this world because if we don't, parents are gonna vote with their feet, and so we can either be part of the solution or part of the problem long term. And a lot of places, they want to be part of the solution.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. I mean, I think that there's this real affinity as there should be, right? To your point, our local schools, they're part of who we are as a community and have been for a very long time, right? And so, being able to preserve that just from a community cultural standpoint is super, super important in almost every single community.

And honestly, schools can, should, will, may, might, must be more in our communities, right? There are these amazing opportunities for young people to really, really explore. And yet, we've gotten stuck in this idea and this ideology that it has to be

what it always has been instead of what is needed right now in the world that our kids are moving into.

And so, I do appreciate the thinking and the approach. And again, like you, we work with so many different communities who are like, "We wanna be able to do this differently. We want a micro school. We want pathways. We want CTE. We want all these different things," recognizing that our students need to be able to choose, and that students also need to be able to move from one type of learning experience to another, so that they can find the one that fits them best.

Garrett Smiley:

That's so important.

Annalies Corbin:

And I think that's-

Garrett Smiley:

Yeah.

Annalies Corbin:

... that's another really intriguing thing. And when you think about an entire community or an ecosystem as an opportunity to learn rather than just a singular place, suddenly, that opens a whole world of possibility. So, let's talk about that element because that's a big piece of what Sora does and how it works. So, let's get into those weeds a little bit. So, tell us a little bit about a learner's experience.

Garrett Smiley:

Yeah. So, we're built around a few different pillars. I'd say our most prominent from an outside perspective is our commitment to project-based learning, which means that students, yes, they still have worksheets every once in a while. You gotta practice things sometimes. This is important, so content is still in there, but content is a tool for students to do new things, is what we believe.

So, how do you have a student, they learn biology, they learn chemistry, blah, blah, blah, to work on every 12 weeks a project that they present that synthesizes that knowledge, connects to a real-world issue they care about, they can present, be proud of, and add to their portfolio to tell the story of what they're capable of, but also who they are, right? That every 12 weeks, and this is every class we do, and I'll talk about our class structure, but including math, including every class has this project sequence.

So, that's a big part of who we are as an institution. That dovetails with our assessment system. So, students are not given multiple choice tests. There's no high stakes, sit down, take this test, and stop learning on this day sort of thing. Yes, we have classes that have a start and end date, but that does not mean that you have to stop learning that day. In fact, most students use the classes, which I'll talk about in a second, but they're like group inquiry, but every student is designing their own project, defending the standards they need to learn, connecting to their thing, blah, blah, working on it, not only until the project showcase, but through, right? And they get mastery-based assessments on each of those standards and kind of competencies therein. So, that's the mastery-based or competency-based assessment.

But then, I'll say my favorite part, which is hard to translate 'cause it's less known, is our interdisciplinary education, which effectively means that, yes, you still learn the standards largely that you'd expect. Students still learn about World War II and they still learn about stoichiometry and chemistry, right? These are still standards, but you don't learn stoichiometry in chemistry class, and then you waltz over, and then learn history. No. We've taken the standards and we've recombined them into these classes where students go to a class like how to build a Martian civilization. That's one of my favorites, so I always talk about it, where you learn Chemistry, and then about balancing the rocket fuel or something. Then, civics to draft your constitution for your Martian civilization.

And then, we mash all of these subjects, so that students are able to see... this is the number one goal in adolescent education in my opinion... see how what we're asking them to do from a learning perspective isn't just a game that adults are, like, making them go through 'cause they hate them. This is how what you're learning connects. If you learn to balance equations, boom, you can make the rocket fuel. This module of your project, right? And then, they're able to present it and put their own flair on it and make it really come to life and connect with their identity and values, right?

So, that's the third pillar. And the fourth is student agency. So, we care a lot about helping students. Yes, they choose which class to be... so, there is choice on which class. You can learn chemistry over here, you can learn chemistry, and maybe fix the oceans expedition, something like that. So, you have choice. But then, once you're in each class, we call them expeditions, I said, but when you're in each class, you're even able to customize, personalize your project. So, as kids get older from middle school into high school, they're taking more and more control over their academic experience.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah, I love it. I love all of it. And to our little side conversation before we got started, so much in common. And my listeners, they know I talk about those similar things, right? As the five Kevlar threads, right? And so, we know that these Kevlar threads are wickedly important. And for us, it's agency, cultural relevance and responsiveness, mastery, transdisciplinary learning for us. We take it one step beyond. And then, problem-based, right? So, that it's all that real world, hands-on, fully applied opportunity. So, I appreciate all of that because that's exactly what we know kids are looking for. Families, they respond so well to those types of environments.

But within more traditional settings, sometimes it can be really difficult to let go of this is how I'm being evaluated, to step back from it a little bit, and say, "This is how I'm being evaluated from a performance or from a set of metrics that have meaning to my school district, but don't necessarily have meaning to my kids in that fully moment." So, how do we do that work, right?

And it's tough to untangle all of those pieces in part, some as folks move around. So, I'm curious then, with that in mind, so as you start to have more and more conversations with districts that are like, "Hey, we're really interested in what Sora's doing, and we wanna bring Sora in alongside some of the other pieces that we're doing or the other modifications that we're making," what do those conversations look like with those administrators and those school leaders that are really leading that transformation work? I'm curious about what you're hearing.

Garrett Smiley:

Yeah. What we're hearing is they recognize that in most districts across the country we talk to, they are seeing enrollment declines. And yes, there is population changes, declining birth rate, yada, yada. But that doesn't fully explain, and they know it because you look and you see homeschooling growth, you see private school growth. And I'm not talking Texas. That is true in Texas, but this is happening in California and Washington and all these places that really don't have formal mechanisms for school choice. Parents don't care. They're choosing anyway, right?

So, they realize this. And it feels like in 2026, they're finally realizing that, okay, they're leaving for two reasons. They're leaving for a desire for more flexible schedules, so this is where most of our implementations are hybrid in some way. So, one, two, three, four days a week in person, but parents want more flexibility. And then, two, they want just a different style of learning, right? So, it's like insanity. You can't expect to change the results of what you've seen over five years by offering the same thing. So, let's change the equation a bit. Let's offer something new, right?

That's our pitch to districts. And then we ask them to really think, "Okay, if you're bought in on that, now let's think about compliance. What actually are your requirements?" Luckily, hybrid is the easiest place to start, and then we can grow into five-day because most states, thanks to those old world online school providers, if you have classes conducted online, you can qualify as an online school, even if it happens in person, which means a dramatic loosening of those traditional requirements, right?

So, that's a really smart place for the districts that are interested in this to start. And then, we can figure out, how does this grow into a five-day-a-week program? We usually start in middle school with our partners, so start in middle school. Then, year two, how's it grow into high school? So, we slowly expand, but keeping it constrained as qualify as an online school in the middle school ages, this is an easy yes. Then, once you see it transform your students, once you see families coming back from homeschool and private school and growing your enrollment, they get really excited about this promise of what unique programs and what change can represent.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. Absolutely. I'm also super curious, Garrett, what do you hear from your learners?

Garrett Smiley:

Yeah.

Annalies Corbin:

What do the learners love about this that is different than what the adults have an expectation for or want? You know what I'm saying? Really, at the heart of it, what do learners tell you?

Garrett Smiley:

Oh, there's so many things. It's funny because they usually pick up... it's like the water in which they swim, so they don't realize what the alternative could fully be. But recently, I had a student who went to a very good university. They said, "I showed up," and most people said, "Oh, you went to online school," blah, blah, blah, or, "You were homeschooled." And everyone assumed that, "Oh, you're doing yourself a disservice because when you get to college..."

This is a funny refrain we hear sometimes. High school needs to sufficiently suck so you're prepared for university, right? This is what people implicitly mean. But they said, "When I got to university, I was far more prepared than my peers because I had exercised agency across many different avenues. I experienced it in managing my day because we only have about two and a half hours of live classes a day, and then

we say, 'Don't talk at kids eight hours a day.'" So, then they go off, and they do their focus time, project time with supports just in time if they need them but focus time. So, they're like, "Oh, I had to manage my own schedule. I'm already used to that." And then, they're, like, creating more opportunity for themselves because they've practiced this agency in designing their own projects and reaching out to community partners, blah, blah, blah. They were the first ones to go get positions at labs and all these things at university, right? So, they just felt like they had a much stronger compass than their peers who'd been in traditional top-down high schools.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. We see the same thing, right? So, the students that participate either in our programs or in our schools that are really trying to shuffle the way the day or the structure happens to work, those kids are far more prepared for whatever that next thing is, partially because they don't need someone to tell them where to go and when, right? And we see that. They have this level of autonomy that's incredibly powerful and rewarding for them.

I always like to also think about, as we wrap the conversation, recognize that folks are listening to us from all over the world, and they're like, "This is really, really cool, but we don't have this in my community," or, "I'm not gonna have the opportunity to institute something like this or to put my kids in this type of program. But I really want for my students, for my learners, for my own child to be able to learn those same sets of skills."

Just to ground the conversation back in where our listeners happen to be at any given moment in time in the world, what do you recommend for folks that say, "Look, we don't have the opportunity to opt into something like this for a variety of reasons, but I value what I'm hearing. How do I put it into practice for my child, for my school, for my community?"

Garrett Smiley:

Well, I'll cheat, and then I'll answer what you actually mean. I'll cheat, and I'll say we are indulging basically every type of partnership now because this is so new. No one's really done with the full academic program in partnership with districts, no one's really done that before the way we're doing it at least.

So, we have people reach out like, "I live in this country in Africa or Europe," blah, blah, blah. Like, "How can we make this work?" Or South America shockingly has been really popular recently. "How can we make this work?" And we'll run that down with you because we also wanna know if we can make it work, right?

So, if this notion is compelling to your listeners and they live somewhere, we can figure out in a quick intro call if it's possible. So, I'll cheat and say-

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, sure. No, that's fair. Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Garrett Smiley:

... we are being very flexible, very open-minded. But how can families get a good portion of the skills we're talking about here? I say a couple different things. Fight to, for middle and high school students, always center what they're doing in meaning, right? So, just have that conversation with them. Even if the classes themselves aren't built around meaning and they're boring, traditional, blah, blah, how does knowing chemistry, how is that going to help your future career? That's one layer of meaning.

Another is why do we think people dedicate their lives to learning this? Like, why is it important or beautiful or 10 to thousands or 100,000 people dedicate their lives to this? Like, why is that the case? And just attack it from every possible angle to help a student understand that this is in fact important and worth their time. And sometimes, it's as silly as when all else fails, money and making money is very motivating to kids. So, just always try to center the greater purpose behind what they're doing.

Layer two is what they're learning and what they get excited about in particular, but it doesn't have to be what they're excited about. Just get them making things. I say just follow the usefulness heuristic. How can I, for a person or a community that I care about, which is a huge win, if kids care about people or communities, like, massive win going into adulthood, but if I care about a person or a community, how can I use what I know to help them?

Boom. Follow that North Star, have them build things with their hands, or, get it out in the real world, and these experiences will propel them, be invaluable. 'Cause I had a similar thing happen when I was in middle school. My parents encouraged us to start this little nonprofit working with... We were super naive stuff "The water crisis is bad. Why doesn't infrastructure exist in poor countries?" "Okay, great. If you care about that, I bet we could raise money and go build a well," right?

And so, just challenging your kid like that – we did, in fact – and it was a game changer for our perspectives on not only the world, but what was possible in the world, right? So, just bring that ethos of meaning and projects and being useful to your parenting.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. And I think there's so much to be said for that. So, agree wholeheartedly. So, Garrett, I wanna thank you very much for taking time out of your day and for chatting with us and sharing about Sora Schools. We will make sure that we have links in the show notes, so if anybody's interested in reaching out, and I hope that you will. And thank you very much for putting out into the world a different way to think about teaching and learning and of a future for our kiddos. We greatly appreciate it.

Garrett Smiley:

Likewise. We're allies in this battle.

Annalies Corbin:

We are indeed.

Garrett Smiley:

So, it's great to know people like you exist as well.

Annalies Corbin:

We are indeed. Thank you so much.

Garrett Smiley:

Awesome. Thanks for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

Change begins with conversations like these. Help us keep them going by following, leaving a review, and sharing Learning Unboxed with your community. Want to keep exploring? Visit passfoundation.org/learning-unboxed.