

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



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Episode #299

Hillary Summerbell:

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I wanted to make it so I could stop the pain for other visual dyslexics 'cause honestly, the reality is I would feel ashamed of myself if I left this planet and didn't try my very best.

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 PASTFoundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Hillary Summerbell, founder and CEO of Summerbell. So Hillary, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Hillary Summerbell:

Wow. Thank you for having me. I'm excited.

Annalies Corbin:

It's gonna be a fun conversation and we're gonna be talking about a topic that is near and dear to me. So, let's set a bit of context for our listeners as we get started. Summerbell is a literacy technology company redefining how visual dyslexic individuals of all ages engage with text. Summerbell's signature positional reading arc technology transforms reading into an accessible visual experience that enhances fluency, comprehension, and confidence. The company's mission is to make reading support equitable, affordable, and empowering for all learners. And that is something we could all get behind. So Hillary, again, thank you for joining us, but more importantly, thank you for what you do.

Hillary Summerbell:

Thank you. It's nice to be appreciated. I'm trying, you know, to change the world. Help!

Annalies Corbin:

Oh, absolutely, right. And we know that there's so much potential in learners, right? And so, if we can eliminate as many barriers as possible, it makes all the difference in the world to allow those Individual personalities, minds, and potentials just to come out and shine.

So, let's start with the sort of highest arcing, I guess – and use the arc deliberately here – sort of a question. I always ask, especially founders, I love to talk to founders. I'm a founder myself. So, what you're talking about doing, (A), it's a big, big lift, right? And so, I always start with, well, what were you thinking? What was this driving need that said, "Hillary, I need to do this thing." So, tell us about your story.

Hillary Summerbell:

Okay. So, I'm a visual dyslexic. I grew up in Northern Virginia. School was terrible, you know. At the back of the class, the C minuses, the Ds. When I was a junior, I pretty much told my mom I couldn't go back to the public school system. And then, I went to a private school that they taught me verbally. And then, that changed everything for me. So, I don't know. Just, it went from horrible experience to verbal experience. And what they did at the school, they just took the linear texts away. So, let me describe what I created for your view or your list

Annalies Corbin:

Please.

Hillary Summerbell:

Yeah, because if you can't see the screen behind me. So, if you consider linear text being, like, just a whole bunch of lines moving in a linear direction, right? So, what I did simply is I took that same text and I put it in a shape of an arc, like an oval. If you imagine one side of an oval, right? It can be an oval, it could be a rainbow, it's a radius, you know. So, now, when you look at my pages, you see text. You know, like, let's say maybe 35 lines of text, but instead of them being straight lines, they're arced lines. So, that's what it is.

Annalies Corbin:

Well, but why does that matter? So, help. So, in case folks have never heard the phrase, a visual dyslexic, help us understand... our readers, our listeners understand that piece as well because the arc matters,

Hillary Summerbell:

it does matter. It matters to visual dyslexics especially. And it works, okay? So, this is

the skinny. This is not something that doesn't work. This actually works. So, please go to the research on my website to learn more about that.

So, what it does is it takes away the overwhelm and the visual clutter. So, just take any cognitive stuff. I mean, when you think about it, you can think about learning to read using your visual spatial abilities, absorbing something through your visuals, spatial abilities, right? So, what it does is it reduces overwhelm, it reduces visual clutter, it slows the reader down, so they actually engage in the text itself.

The analogy that I use often is if you're in a car, and it would be highly likely that you would be going fast and down a straight road. But if you were in the same car and you were in curves, like you're going around mountain tops or exits or whatever it is, you slow down. So, it's a natural response. So, that's what we did. I ended up using graphic organization to solve my own reading problem. And it's really the engagement and the relaxation when you read. Does that make sense?

Annalies Corbin:

It does. And you know, it's really interesting, and you and I were talking about this just a little bit before we actually started recording. One of the reasons this is so near and dear is because I'm dyslexic. I was not diagnosed as dyslexic until I was an adult because my youngest son, who is a 2E kid is very, very dyslexic. And he is also a visual dyslexic, right?

And it's really interesting to me what you've done. At the time, he's almost 22 years old now, so this was over 20 years ago when we started doing this work and nobody was talking about curvature or the noise or the distractions around. But in reading the materials, the pre-read materials that were sent over, one of the things I was super fascinated about in your work is the fact that you talked about this visual component. You talked about the idea that words, texts has shape, but it also has movement in motion. And it's really interesting because those were some of the strategies that in an early research study that my son participated in, they were teaching him as well.

So, I know the power of what you're talking about. I've lived it. And one of our strategies was because, again, we didn't have a mechanism that was going to take text and give it curvature. So, I love what you're doing. Those are resources and tools that anybody can use, so that's fabulous. I would use a Kindle device with him and make the words as big as possible. And because it, again... And I didn't realize what I was doing, but it was literally changing the white space. It was taking away the distractions and the noise. So, I think that the approach that you're grabbing around that is really, really interesting.

So, talk a little bit more about, sort of, how the approach you've developed, how you're seeing impacts.

Hillary Summerbell:

I'm happy to do that, but, but before, think about a lawyer, right? Everybody has seen a... I guess they call it a lawyer's brief or whatever.

Annalies Corbin:

Oh, sure.

Hillary Summerbell:

And there is zero visual distraction in those briefs.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah.

Hillary Summerbell:

Right? They can change the spacing or whatever. And they do that because they wanna increase comprehension and relaxation and whatever. So, I think graphic organization is a real thing. And, also, I'm gonna, for myself... I mean, the thing is all we did is change the formatting.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, yeah.

Hillary Summerbell:

That's all we did. It was the same lessons, and we just reformatted the text. So, to me, it's like the big red flag. This is a visual issue because otherwise, it would've happened to have been curriculum or whatever.

Annalies Corbin:

And that is a mistake. And thank you for calling that out because I think, oftentimes... and parents, they get perplexed and they get scared, especially if they're not dyslexic themselves or have had no experience with it. And suddenly, you hear this ominous potential word about your child from a teacher or from the school. And there can be moments of panic. And the thing that I would always tell people when I was engaging in conversations is these are some of the most amazing and intelligent and creative people on the planet. When you look at the broad spectrum of the people who've declared themselves dyslexics, they're some of our greatest thinkers in the world.

Hillary Summerbell:

Albert Einstein, George Washington.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely, right? So, this is not an intelligence problem. So, thank you for bringing that to the fore 'cause it's not even a comprehension problem. I think it's a visual problem.

Hillary Summerbell:

It is, yeah. And for many, not for all, but for many, that is true, yes. And it can be corrected easily, and it can be diagnosed in like two minutes. You can just put a linear piece of paper in front of anybody and a positional reading paper with Summerbell, and then you'll see the preference. And they'll pick up what they're most comfortable with. And then, it could just save so much time and energy, you know. Diagnostic tool. Okay. So, yes. So, 100%.

Annalies Corbin:

You know, I'm just really, really curious. As you thought through what was gonna be necessary in your own experiences then, how do you translate that from, "Hey, this is how I helped myself," into a technology company that's helping many?

Hillary Summerbell:

So, this is the deal. I grew up in Northern Virginia, and I've thought about it. First of all, I've read stuff that says it is often that a dyslexic is an entrepreneur because I'd get fired if I worked for somebody, right? So, I've always made my own reign because I would simply get fired. Okay.

But I also grew up in a metropolitan area where I know that change is real. And it might be hard, but there are people interested in education. There's people beyond... It's the core of the government, right? I live 15 minutes from the White House. So, I wasn't afraid. I think that's the first thing. I wasn't afraid. I marched myself into the patent office. I was like, "Hello. This is an idea. I don't think it's there." I was shocked that I couldn't find it anywhere. We tried to find this idea.

So, I think the lift, the heavy lift why? Well, one thing is... so I'm an interior designer. I ended up getting an Associates in interior design 'cause it was only art. I spent 20 years of my life fixing problems. I don't know how many clients I had, thousands, couple thousand clients over the years, you know? And so, my mind, when I see something that doesn't work and it's a lot of geometry when you're designing it, you do art, architecture, it's all has to be kind of balanced. And if there's no flow, if it's not balanced, then you gotta change it. You can do it with color or furniture, whatever.

So, what happened was when I finally got so frustrated, like I was in tears, I have got to teach myself how to read because I need to read emails that are really important, that have a lot to do with money, and I need to understand that. And I can't depend on others sometimes.

And so, I just took away what didn't work. Just like the ugly green sectional in the living room, I just took it away. And I started drawing in a spiral. It was an article in the Washington Post, and it was about the dictator in China or something like that. And the words were big and it wasn't easy. Right? I wrote that article, that paragraph in a

spiral like this, like that. And then, I read it. I didn't have to change the page direction. I could read it on the top, on the side, on the bottom, on the side, on the top, on the side. And I thought, that's weird. That's weird. I mean, I don't think that's normal. And then I was like, "Oh, my God." And then, I think that that was probably the beginning of the arc.

Then, what happened is I had a very influent clientele, and I started asking them, you know, neurologist, psychiatrist, I called up special ed teachers, doctors, and I just kept on saying, "Why does this work?" I mean, it was instant. And then, I eventually got to an educational... so, Jeremy Dunsworth, he is a software developer for educational products. And then, during COVID, it was me, four teachers from Washington DC, from the lab school, whatever, and Jeremy, and we built the software.

Annalies Corbin:

That is so awesome.

Hillary Summerbell:

Yeah. Every Sunday at 2:00, it was, like, mandatory meeting. And it probably took us like three months. Well, it took him six months, I think, the teacher. It was intense. So, basically, I didn't wanna stop at I fixed myself. I wanted to make it so I could stop the pain for other visual dyslexics 'cause, honestly, the reality is I would feel ashamed of myself if I left this planet and didn't try my very best.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. So, let's talk about... so the software gets designed and developed. So, then let's talk about access, right? So, this has been created for individual users, but does it have broader application? I mean, I'm sure part of your intent, you deliberately were working with educators, and I love that by the way that you involved them in the actual design and development process. So critically important. So, my assumption is that there's a classroom or a bigger, broader application opportunity recognizing not everybody needs this tool that's sitting in a room together, right? But some will. So, what does access to this look like, or how do you think about that short term versus long term?

Hillary Summerbell:

We've invested a lot in the software because when I was growing up, there were books. I'm 62, right? Like I didn't know. But basically, what I really realized was Johns Hopkins University School of Education for Reform conducting an evaluation of Summerbell in Pennsylvania. And what they are, they're a piece of the university that is all about technology because, basically, it was explained to me that in the schools, technology is just going to be so very important and this is gonna be our new vehicle. The books are gonna be gone and the technology is in.

So, what they do is they research different technology companies or whatever, or different programs that would be helpful for K through 12. That's their main mission. So, then, I really understood how important it was. They told me to create the software, but this thing about the software is you can have it in your hands in one minute. There's no drama.

Yes, public schools, yes, it needs to be in the public schools. I think it's a diagnostic tool for second grade. Our website has all sorts of information about all that stuff. I just made a deal with myself. I said, "Look, I'm gonna keep doing this until I hit a wall so thick that I just can't get through," and I haven't hit a wall. I mean, it's been hard sometimes for sure. But I didn't hit like... because everybody wants to help kids read.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, yeah.

Hillary Summerbell:

It's an easy ask.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah.

Hillary Summerbell:

You know, people are interested. And so, that's why I tried to just always do the next right thing to build the company. We needed software. I raised money for software. We needed a patent attorney. I raised money for a patent attorney. So, every time that we've hit a hurdle, I just ask for help.

Annalies Corbin:

You're not gonna get a yes if you don't ask, right? So, absolutely. Let's talk a little bit about the user experience. So, a kid gets this software. So, walk our listeners through, how does it work, right? So, yeah. So, just give them a sense of what it's capable of doing, right? So, can it take... the software then just take any digital asset and make this transformation for it? Or how does it work?

Hillary Summerbell:

Okay. There's three pieces to it. I'll start with the first one we developed. And I think it's tools@summerbell.com. That is the original software that I developed with the teachers. Basically what happens is it's a Chrome extension. So, you have to get it at the web store or whatever it is. You put it in your computer, and then there's tools that come up. So, let's say you go to Wikipedia. You go to Wikipedia and there's an article about dogs. You just copy it, like the copy thing. And then, you paste it into the Summerbell reading tool, right? There's a gray box. You just copy-paste, and then you

hit the button, and then it converts into Summerbell. And then, you can also... in that same website, you can write in it. It's like a typewriter.

Annalies Corbin:

Wow. Okay. Interesting. Took care of both elements here. Awesome. Yeah.

Hillary Summerbell:

Yeah. And we created something called the Word Helper, which helps you decode the words. So, the Word Helper is brilliant. So, when a reader comes upon a word that they don't know what the word means, you can click on it and it chunks the syllables vertically. So, let's say Delaware, right? So, let's say I've never seen that word before. So, I just click on it, and then something drops down. And it's Del, D-E-L-A-W-A-R-E.

And so, in my mind, I understand it 'cause I took away the visual clutter. It's not vertical. So, the original website, you can do the writer, the reader, and the word helper. The Chrome extension, which is our second one, that's where you can do... you can't write in it, but you can go on the internet and do research about George Washington, and then the reader can read in the arc.

And then, the other thing that they created, we are customizable, so the arc can be customized to different radiuses. That's really cool because it really becomes an independent... you know, it's just for the reader. You can change the page. You can change how it looks. You can double space it, single space it, big, small, but those things have been done before. It's really the radius that's so important.

And then, I told my guys, my software people, I'm like, "But I hate laptops. I don't like computers, really." So, I said, I want it on my phone. And then, I'm like, "Yeah, I want it on my phone. I use my phone 98% of the time." And so, then, we had to create. So, we created a browser. Okay. So, it's a browser like Chrome or Firefox or Safari that you buy on the app store. So, what that means is I can be on my telephone, I wanna read an article in the New York Times about today's news, I just go into my browser, like you would go into Chrome, and I put New York Times, and then the article comes up and just scrolls in the arc.

Annalies Corbin:

Awesome. Yeah.

Hillary Summerbell:

Right.

Annalies Corbin:

Love that.

Hillary Summerbell:

And it works in almost every language.

Annalies Corbin:

Wow. And a clarifying question about the writer, the writing tool. So, then, after you've written whatever it is that an individual is gonna write, I have to turn it in to somebody who doesn't work and live in the arc. Does it give me the option of how to export-

Hillary Summerbell:

Yep.

Annalies Corbin:

... what visual format? Perfect.

Hillary Summerbell:

It goes back. Yeah.

Annalies Corbin;

You've thought about all these parts.

Hillary Summerbell:

I did. You know, it's important.

Annalies Corbin:

It is.

Hillary Summerbell:

It's all the different... so, with spelling, it's creating language, proofreading. It's reading itself. And that's what the teachers kept saying they love so much about it is the readers actively engaged in the task of reading. And so, it's working. So, that's why I suggest to anybody that would like to try it to... you know, I would say 15 minutes a day in the program and you'll see results immediately. I sound like a lady on the TV, but like it's instant.

And then, with any type of consistency, like five days a week, I say a hundred days 'cause a hundred days is an easy thing to say, or two days, or pick a number, you're gonna see an improvement. But you gotta do it right? You gotta create the nerve, whatever those things. You gotta...

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah. You have to practice. My son, you know? And it was interesting, right? Second grade, right. Spot on, right. You know, when we really start to bump up against these things and the kids innate ability to sort of problem solve around the issue that's yet to be diagnosed catches up with them, right? The learning and those pieces start to

bump up, right? And then, that's when you see the acting out and the frustration and the, "Oh, my gosh. I'm stupid. I can't do this." You know, all of those things that we typically see in kids about that age, they're struggling with this particular learning difference in the traditional setting.

So, I really love all of these different elements that you were thinking about because that's exactly what the lived experience is, right? And as a parent who's been through all of it and fought the battles and worked in school districts where for many years, dyslexia wasn't something that they wanted to address at all, they didn't understand it, they didn't really have tools for it, the laws hadn't caught up with some of the differences that our students were expressing.

And so, I appreciate so much the work that you've engaged in because it's so desperately needed. Not all learners learn the same. Full stop. So, if we can't lead with recognizing that every child has incredible potential and that every child is going to encounter barriers, some of which are easy to solve, that some of which are more complicated, and that we have this collective need to create a world where it's equitable, that everybody gets access to the knowledge, the understanding, and the potential. So, thank you for that.

Hillary Summerbell:

A thousand percent. Oh my gosh. And yes, because I even wanna, like, rename it. I wanna say like your neurotypical people, right. And then, you've got your creatives.

Annalies Corbin:

And I love that too because you're you're not wrong about that.

Hillary Summerbell:

And they... It's almost 20% of human population, right? You've gotta be able to teach that creativity and look at how they're underleveraged.

Annalies Corbin:

Very underleveraged. I agree with that as well. Yeah. With that in mind, I always like to sort of, as we get close to wrapping up the conversation, especially with creative people like yourself, founders, folks that are just really digging in, trying to solve problems, I always like to ask, well, what's next? What are you working on? Or what's the next iteration of the way you're thinking about this? Because I always find that part really, really intriguing because as you said, entrepreneurial, especially serial entrepreneurs, they're constantly out there thinking about how to solve problems, which is exactly what, as we think about sort of the new version or vision, for what incredible educators are doing every day in their classrooms, they're really thinking about what could we do next as an incredible way to learn, to think, to get students

moving down the, the path of whatever that journey happens to be. So, for Hillary, what does that look like for you?

Hillary Summerbell:

Well, it's a two-part answer. One, look at Summerbell, okay? That's next. That's next. I want everybody to look at Summerbell. I don't care what country you're in, whatever, just everybody can look at it. Just take a look at it.

Secondly, I've actually been thinking about that lately. It's funny that you ask. And I was chewing off one of my friend's ears about my thoughts on it. This is what I... if I could wave my little Hillary magic wand, this is what I would wanna see. In the public school system, you got your whole hundred percent of your population, right? And then they do... and then, I'm gonna say you have your creative dyslexics or I'm gonna call 'em, just say you have your creatives. We'll just name 'em creatives. And then, you have mainstream. Creatives and mainstream. I mean, those are not mainstream. Anyway, you got two groups, you know.

And let's call the groups... why don't we say this? Let's call the groups, let's call them a color. Let's say one is purple and one is green. Okay. Let's say the purple group is the 20%, the less of the minority, not the labeled, but the minority population. And the green group, there are more greens than there are purples, basically. Okay. So, then, what you do or what I... I'm actually gonna talk to a superintendent about it in New Jersey this month, the idea.

So, one of my ideas is that you have a classroom that's big, and it's a big team thing. So, let's say there's a hundred people or there are a hundred kids in the class, in the purple group, and let's say it's as big as the warehouse. Let's say it's a warehouse. So, you have desk, and you have stuff, but then on the other one side of the... so, you have the boards and all the... whatever the tools are. But then, on the other side of the warehouse, you have pottery, you have architecture, drafting tables, you have paints, you have a shop where people can build stuff, learn about math. You have a stage.

So, my vision is when you read a book, like the Call of the Wild, you make a play out of it. When you have to do a comprehensive math problem, like a story problem, you design a birdhouse or you design a dollhouse. So, I want to integrate the... give the students the opportunity to use their creativity just to learn academics. So, like academics by design, right?

And then, at the end of every quarter, I wanna have an installation of an art show or like an installation of their work in the auditorium. So, they can be hailed with accolades for their creativity rather than be labeled dumb. So, I wanna change how we look at the greens and the purples. And I think that there's... I mean, there's gonna be a lot of people that wanna come over from the green side to the purple side. So,

the question is, how do you get the balance? But we deserve that. As creatives and different thinkers, we deserve a right to the same education experience. And if we can learn math from building a dollhouse, why the French does not?

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. And to your point, there are some really incredible schools and educational programs around the world that are doing that exact same thing, right? And it's brilliant, and the results are amazing, and kids are thriving, and educators are super happy and content, right? So, absolutely. Part of it is we-

Hillary Summerbell:

Public schools, not private.

Annalies Corbin;

No, these are public that I'm talking about as well. So, it's super exciting. But your point is a really valid one that as we sort of think about and stretch the boundaries of what is education, what is its purpose, what should it look like, how should it feel, we we have to be really, really open to being super collaborative, super creative and embracing those qualities in the everyday.

So, Hillary, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to join us to talk about what happens when a compulsive interior designer decides to take on literacy, reading, writing, and solving for the world. So, I love the fact that you took your own experience and your natural creativity and you've brought it to bear to solve a real problem for learners. So, thank you so much.

Hillary Summerbell:

Oh my gosh. Thank you for letting me share my story.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And we will have links and information in the show notes for everybody.

Hillary Summerbell:

Yeah, that sounds great.

Annalies Corbin:

Thanks.

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.