TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed

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Episode #301
Betsy Potash:

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Annalies Corbin:
Welcome to Learning Unboxed 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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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.

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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 Betsy Potash, a former English teacher, turn blogger, curriculum creator, and the host of the Spark Creativity Teacher Podcast. So Betsy, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Betsy Potash:
Thank you so much. I'm excited.

Annalies Corbin:
I'm excited too. And for our listeners, this is a boomerang because I just got off of a conversation with Betsy for her show. And so, we're just diving right in, continuing with the great conversation. But since all of you were not with us for that conversation, although hopefully you will listen to both – that's always the goal – let's set a little bit of context for our listeners as we get started here today on our conversation.

We know that it's really, really difficult for educators to really get out of this habit that, often, we learn in our schools of education, sort of old models, this idea of know-the-answer questioning. And so, if you think about going back to the ideas in the book, Killing Ideas Softly? the Promise and Perils of Creativity in the Classroom, we know that structure where a teacher stands in front to lecture and occasionally ask

questions that bring in student ideas, except that really, as an educator, we already have an answer in mind when we ask. It's really easy to fall back on that.

But Betsy, in her own journey, really bumped up against this and early on figured out that was just really not the way she wanted to go. And it was definitely boring for her kids. And quite frankly, I suspect, pretty boring for her as well. And as she prepped for our conversation today, she sent over a piece that I really wanna share with you because she said that after her first day in the classroom watching her students' eyes glaze over as she stood in front questioning all her life choices, Betsy decided never to teach that way again. And she moved instead into project-based learning, book clubs, poetry slams, play performances, and an overall theme of student-centered learning with community engagement and a real-world audience. And for our listeners, you know that's exactly what we love here on Learning Unboxed.

So, Betsy, I wanna start with, as you've done your work and you transitioned from being what I can only imagine is an incredible English teacher into the world of working with and helping other educators, how do you help teachers get out of this same space where they know it's not the right thing, but I'm struggling to figure out what to do instead. How do you help them not have that first day that you had?

Betsy Potash:
Yeah, that first day was just so painful, and it was so viscerally painful that it just stayed with me. It stayed with me for 15 years. When you're standing up there, and you think you've got a lesson plan that's really exciting, and you start going through it, and you realize that it's just not hitting, and it's all about you and it's not about them, and they don't have a chance to engage or share their ideas or dig into things that really matter to them, it just hits you, right? And it makes teaching drudgery.

And so, my goal is always to find inroads for teachers, so that they can have an experiment with, sort of, leaving that spotlight that maybe they've been taught that they have to be in because many of us grew up in classrooms where the teacher was always at the center, at the front, sort of making notes on the whiteboard, going through the PowerPoint, going through those like projector slides where they were writing with little markers, and then it was going up to the projecting screen and you were just taking notes. And that's what it was.

And so, we have that history, kind of, in our bones, but then you try something else where you're not centered and where the students are centered. And it can be a lot of different things. It can be book clubs, it can be running a poetry slam unit, it can be teaching students how to podcast and getting away from the front and being like, "What do you wanna podcast about? Let's look at these different podcasts. Do you

think this intro is good? Do you think that one's good? What kind of music would you use in yours? What kind of story would you tell? Would you interview someone?" Like, all of a sudden, you realize how rich that is to have 30 different kids diving into what they wanna share with the world and how they wanna share it with the world.

And they're excited because their use of their ELA skills has this real-world context. There are millions of real podcasts going on. Their favorite celebrities have podcasts. Their parents are listening to podcasts in the car. They're like, "Oh, I could really put this on Apple Podcasts," and you're like, "Yeah, you really could. This could really be part of your career later on. Maybe you'll have a small business with a podcast. Maybe you'll work for a company that wants to get its message out and they're sick of doing newsletters, and you'll be the one to do the podcast."

And it's just like when teachers have that unit like that, it's like a breakthrough unit, and they feel the energy of it and the excitement of it, and then they're looking for the next thing, "Okay, what's the next thing? Maybe I'm gonna have a documentary film festival with my students," or "Maybe we're gonna read this play, but instead of just reading in the classroom, we're gonna build up to a production of it over at the elementary school, and we're gonna create the sets, and we're gonna do a press release to the local paper, and they're gonna come and videotape our performance." And all these real-world skills and ELA skills are gonna intertwine, and it's gonna be this really exciting student-centered unit where all the same skills can be taught; it's just that you have that frame that provides engagement for the kids.

Annalies Corbin:
And once again, it's packed full of agency. And as we talked about in our last conversation-

Betsy Potash:
Right.

Annalies Corbin:
... when we have these environments that are so filled with agency, we see the spark that happens and it happens everywhere. It happens amongst the students. It happens with the teachers. It's powerful.

Betsy Potash:
Yeah, when I first got started with curriculum design, just night after night, I was up till midnight, one in the morning because I would get excited about whatever we're gonna be doing. I'd be like, "Okay. We're gonna study these six American poets this week." My kids aren't gonna like them. My kids are not gonna be excited about these

six American poets. What other poets could I bring in? What can I have students do with these poems? Could we get a writer to come in and talk about their poetry process? Could we do a workshop that would let students tap into their own context at home. Could we? Could we? Could we? Could we?

And then, all of a sudden, it's just like, "It's so exciting." You're building this unit that you almost feel like you're doing, like, "Drum roll please," and you get to class, and you're like, "Oh, they're gonna love it."

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah. And they do, right? And they do.

Betsy Potash:
Hopefully they do.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah.

Betsy Potash:
And if it doesn't go perfectly, and then you're prototyping. And the next time, it'll be a little better and a little better.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, absolutely. I love that so much. And I agree with you a hundred percent, and that's absolutely the things that we see in our own work as well. I wanna dig in a little bit because your work, really, around helping educators think about different ways that they can really help students embrace what they're learning in a variety of creative ways. So, let's talk a little bit about the way you do that work.

And so, in particular, I'm really interested in the work that you've done around hexagonal thinking and some of the other ways that you bring these ideas into classroom. So, share with us a little bit about that work.

Betsy Potash:
So, I think as an English teacher, and I can't speak as much the other disciplines, but it must be true across quite a few disciplines, discussion is really a core part of the learning. From day to day, you need to have a chance to talk about what the kids are learning, what they're processing, how they connect it to other things. And if you frame for that discussion is you at the front with kind of the ping pong ball thing, "What do you guys think of this? Jeffrey." Jeffrey says what he thinks. "Oh, Jeffrey. Yeah, that's what I think too. And I'm gonna elaborate on it and talk a little more from my

perspective, Anna." And then, you hear from Anna. And meanwhile, 28 other kids are quiet and they're listening, but who they're really looking at is you. "What do you think of what Anna said? What do you think of what Jeffrey said? Do you validate it?" Because in the end, you're the one who matters, right? You're the voice of knowledge.

And I really believe that in discussion, we have to get away from that voice of knowledge thing. And I've seen a lot of different formats that can work for it. Teachers can have success with Socratic seminar, with Harkness discussions, with book clubs, with fishbowl discussions, silent discussions, hexagonal thinking. There are a lot of different ways.

But the point with all of them is that you are not at the front and that students are listening to each other and the meaning is coming from them and they're the ones making the connections. And everyone's not just looking to you to either validate or invalidate to let them know if they're right because on most things in this world, there isn't just an answer, especially when it comes to the big human questions of literature, and writing, and voice, and what do we think about what's happening in the world right now. Your perspective isn't better than theirs. It's different. It might be informed by different things but everyone needs a chance to voice that.

And so, I have looked throughout my career for different structures that I can offer to teachers that just help get there quickly. And hexagonal thinking is one that I love so much. I didn't invent it, that's for sure. What I understand is it came out of the business world as a way to think creatively and connect different ideas. But I have done a lot of work to help try to develop it, to make it easier for teachers to put into place.

And so, the idea at its core is really simple. If you can picture a little hexagon, go back to your math class, it's this little shape with six sides, and then picture an idea on a hexagon. So, one example that I like to use is for the book 1984. Your students are studying Orwell's 1984. On a hexagon, you might put "Winston," the main character. On another hexagon, you might put, "Double think a concept from 1984." You might put some more concepts. You might put some more characters. But then, you might also move out into politics. You might put "Authoritarianism." You might put other texts that relate to dystopia. You might put events from history. You might put events that are happening right now.

And then, you'll offer students this deck of ideas in a small group, and you say "Okay, line up the hexagon next to another one, so that their little sides are touching if you feel like there's a connection. And then, you have to place them all." So, if you have Orwell at the center of one, and then you put five things around him, six things around him, and he's full, and then you get another hexagon that you wanna put by him, what

do you take out or what do you move over here? What do you connect to something that's happening in America right now? What do you put over here that is happening to this era in history? And how do you explain it?

There's no right answer in hexagonal thinking. There's only, "This is what I think. This is how I made this connection." And then, your group member being, like, "Well, I see that but I also really think that idea should go over here. This is why I really think so." And then, the other kids in the group are like, "Okay, well, I agree with Brittany" or whatever. And like that conversation about how to make the connections is the point, right? It's a chance to argue. You share your opinion. You also learn a lot about group dynamics, especially if you do some reflection, like metacognition at the end of it. How did you relate to your group? How did you decide where to move things?

And then, once they have these webs of connection, they can start to write about them. They can write in post-its near the connection, like, "This is why I connected this,: or you can tape them all up on the chalkboard, and you can give everybody colorful chalk, and they can be writing, "This is why I did this." And then, kids can start walking around and seeing, "Okay, my group did this. How did other people connect these same hexagons?" It's gonna look completely different. Their rationales may be completely different and it's all valid.

And then, if at the end of that, you start writing about a big question about how authors influence society through dystopia or something like that, then you're gonna have all these ideas swirling around in your head from history, from culture, from current events, from the book, instead of just "Well, Orwell influences people with fear and example on page four." The conversation becomes much broader. And that's really an essential part of creative thinking. When you mash up ideas from different contexts, from different disciplines, you're forced to think differently, you're forced to expand your definitions.

And so, hexagonal thinking is just a vehicle for that that really can work for anything. And so, I think it's a great tool for teachers to have in their toolkit for discussion. Like, not every week, not every two weeks even, but like regularly come back to this 'cause kids are gonna get better and better at it. They're gonna understand it better as a vehicle for ideas. I use it in my own work. I'm writing a book right now, and I have got my research taped up to my wall in hexagons. And it's really fun to be like, "What is this concept more like? Is it more like this area over here where I'm thinking about multimodal texts or does it fit better in this area over here where I'm thinking about creative idea generation?" or whatever. It's really a useful frame.

Annalies Corbin:
It really is. And one of the extensions that I love of this approach is that as your students get more comfortable, and thank you for advocating for keep using it, use it on a somewhat regular basis because kids will learn to get really effective at it. And the extension that I love with it is when you get to the point where you can confidently, as the educator, say to your students, after they've done that exercise, now I want you to add five examples from your own personal life or experience into this example that we're working with right now. So, back to 1984, for example. And they can do that. And not only can they do that, but they're quick to grab because they understand it so well.

And you're right. When we can scaffold kids to learn these skill sets, it's gonna be something they will draw on forever. I don't know about you, but I remember when I was working on my first book, and this was many years ago, so I would definitely age myself, and I ain't gonna say how many years ago that was but the scaffolding that I had back, I remember, in middle school, my English teacher teaching me how to write that research paper-

Betsy Potash:
Note cards.

Annalies Corbin:
... and the index cards, yes. And I don't do it that way anymore after I got through that first big book. But the genesis of that work was tapping back into that skill I learned when I was young and it was powerful. And since then, I've adapted numerous ways over and over again. That's the win.

Betsy Potash:
Yeah, I agree. When you were talking about adding the five from their own life, it got me thinking about an idea I've had lately, which is to give them a wild card hexagon that feels like it shouldn't relate at all.

Annalies Corbin:
I love it. Yeah.

Betsy Potash:
And I also think that's fun. Just like halfway in, be like, "I'm coming around with a wild card." And then it's AI or the name of a popular movie coming out tomorrow or whatever. And they just like, "How am I gonna make this connection?" Or it's like, "Volcano." "Okay. Volcano, 1984. Like how can I process them together?" There's just so many fun possibilities with it.

Annalies Corbin:
It is fun. But it's also interesting to me, and I guess the other reason I really like this approach so much is it's fun to me then to watch students who they may not use it as laid out for them, but they will modify it for other things where they can see value in the pieces and parts.

So, for example, I have a really great educator that I've been working with for a number of years on a project, and we've iterated on it, we've brought it into the classroom, and this is a big giant project tied to one of our sort of microlearning environments around students that ultimately wanna go into healthcare. So, that part's neither here nor there. The premise of this work was that we know that we can give the students all kinds of incredible foundational knowledge that they need as they traverse whatever this path is gonna be. Some of these kiddos will ultimately be doctors or nurses. Some will be lab technicians, some will be EMTs, some might be attorneys working in the healthcare space. Any and all is an option there.

But one of the things that we realized is that as students leave our environment and they go off into the world, whatever that happens to be, post-secondary or right to work, one of the things that they're missing is this deep understanding of how to communicate effectively very quickly with people. In other words, how to ask really great questions. As we do this project over the course of several years around teaching them how to be observant, the average time spent in a new healthcare situation, whether it'd be a patient and a doctor scenario or everything in between is eight minutes across the entirety. Eight minutes, that's all you get. You get eight minutes to get as much information as possible, so that you can then turn around and have an action, whatever that happens to be.

So, how do you teach kids to use that eight minutes to its absolute fullest and to gain the greatest amount of information? And so, we work on this project around how to teach kids how to ask good questions. And I was talking to the group of students the other day, and we were talking, and then at one point a student made some sort of comment, and I said, "Well, that's not really a very good response." This student says to me, "Dr. Corbin, you taught me how to ask good questions, not how to give good answers." And I was like, "That's an exact... it's that piece. It's like that next scaffolded opportunity."

And so, I love the way you're using the hexagonal thinking and the tool because you're really, really teaching through this mechanism, both the educators and students how to level up.

So, let's talk about one of the other pieces that you mentioned early was around silent discussion. This is another one that I like very much and I've used numerous times as well. So, talk a little bit about that strategy for our listeners.

Betsy Potash:
Silent discussion is one of my favorite favorites. I think you can apply it in absolutely every context. I've used it with adults, I've used it with kids, I've definitely used it in online contexts. But the way I came to it, and probably many people have come to it in their own ways, in their own context, but I was running a discussion in class and we just hit dirt. Nobody could think of anything to say it seemed, and I didn't wanna rescue them. And so, we're all just sort of, you know. It was silent.

Annalies Corbin:
Staring at each other.

Betsy Potash:
We were trying our discussion and nothing was happening. And I was like, "No. I know they have things to say. I know they have questions and ideas." And I said, "Everybody just open your notebook to the next page and write a question on your mind. Write a question at the top. Now, pass it to the right. Respond to the question." And they had 90 seconds or whatever, they responded. And I looked around and I'm like, 20 kids are writing questions and writing responses that they could have just been saying out loud, but they weren't ready for that right then, and they're ready for this.

And so, they're having this conversation on paper. And then they pass again. They read the question, they read the response, they read the next response. They can respond to either of the responses or the original question. They can build, they can draw arrows, they can disagree. And once we've done that for 10 minutes and everybody had just been swimming in all these questions and ideas, when we came back to the oral discussion, boom, it was lighting a match to the fire. Everybody had tons to say.

But I think with a silent discussion, you can use it as a vehicle to come back together into the group, or you can just keep it a silent discussion. You can put giant papers up on your walls, or you can put your questions across your whiteboards and chalkboards and butcher paper, and you can just let people go to the questions that interest them, and start writing, and then read what other people have written and then respond. And it just becomes this messy, big flow of ideas. And it's so interesting.

And I come back to an example of a time I was doing a PD on choice reading and I had a lot to share. I had done a lot of work with Choice Reading, but part of the PD

was to have huge poster boards all over the room, inviting the teachers to say, "What are the books that are really lighting the fire in your classroom? What are the strategies that you've used that have really been successful? What are the concerns that you have? Write your concern, respond to somebody else's concern, et cetera." And in that way, the conversation was so much richer than just having my voice in the center, "This is what's really working well in my classroom." That way, we had, "This is what's really working well in 50 classrooms." And how was that not better?

And I feel the same way about conversations with kids. I could lecture to you about this moment in literature and bring what I've learned from my BA in English and my MA in English. Great. That's something. Or we could have the conversation with the reactions, the opinions, the connections that 30 different kids would make, and it would just be so much more, right?

And so, silent discussion can really help you get there because many kids, for various reasons, are gonna feel uncomfortable fighting their way into an oral discussion. And so, if you provide the venue of silent discussions, at least some of the time or as a warmup for an oral discussion, you allow the kids who might want more time to craft their ideas or who might feel judged sometimes in oral discussions or just who may not come up with something that they can just shoot out in the two seconds of silence before somebody else says something. And in a silent discussion, there's just room for everybody.

Annalies Corbin:
There is. And to your point, it's also honoring that every learner, (A), they learn things differently; and some really, really need to be engaged in that particular activity to even absorb the conversation that's being had and others are gonna operate in. But the other thing is that it provides an opportunity to space to grow confidence. Because sometimes, I think educators forget that it's not just scaffolding kids, but it's also providing the space for them to actually grow in whatever that skillset or that activity or that training that you are providing.

Betsy Potash:
Yeah, it's true. They get to practice having a discussion in a more low stakes way. They don't have to feel like everyone is staring at them with every single thing they say.

Annalies Corbin:
Well. And you know, it's tough to be a kid these days.

Betsy Potash:
Yeah.

Annalies Corbin:
Right? The pressures are high, right? So, anytime we can minimize that, I really love that. So, thank you for that. I wanna talk as we finish up, you are working on a new book, The Contemporary ELA Playbook. So, what do you-

Betsy Potash:
Working title. Working title.

Annalies Corbin:
Yeah, working title. Fair, fair. But mainly, what I'm interested in, sort of, as we wrap up our conversation is, so what is it you're trying to get at with this piece of work? What are you tackling? I'm always fascinated when I get the opportunity to talk with folks on this program to really talk to them about, what is it that you are working on? What's that next thing? What are you spending your time and energy thinking about? So, talk to us a little bit about this work.

Betsy Potash:
Well, I kind of have these two halves of my career that both inform my work in really different ways. The first half was in the classroom. I was a teacher in California, and then I was a teacher overseas in Bulgaria. And I learned a lot in both contexts and really shaped many parts of the way I think about education. But then, I left the classroom and became this, what I do now, right? Trying to communicate ideas about creativity in the classroom.

And so, in some ways, I had to take my ELA skills and use them in a different real-world context where I had to try to reach people with my ideas. And sometimes, that looks like writing. Like I learned in my BA and MA in English, long form writing. But very often, it looks like a multimodal expression. It looks like my podcast. It looks like making videos. It looks like social media, carousels, and just so many different ways of communicating an idea to try to reach people.

And so, I've become very interested in bringing more of that to the English classroom, more podcasting, more filmmaking, one pagers, sketch notes, text signal thinking, ways of looking at information visually because I think that's how the world is right now. And I really think that students get excited about expressing themselves that way.

And so, what I'm taking as I write this book is I'm pulling sort of my ideas and the ideas I've studied across my research, and learning, and education, and my interviews. I've done 400 episodes of my podcast now, so I've gotten to speak to a lot of educators and thinkers and authors. How can I take all that and look at ELA as it is now, as it can be now, across modes, across more contemporary texts, across more student-centered learning and provide almost, like, recipes?

My first idea for this book was for it to really look like a cookbook. There would be chapters, like multimodal texts, and then there would be recipes, basically. Like a beautiful photo of the idea, and then the "This is how you do it in your classroom." And it's altered a little bit along the way to be a little bit more traditional in its format, but it's the same basic idea. I'm hoping to provide 100 lessons that are really engaging contemporary, focused on things like choice, multimodality, diverse, contemporary, text, creativity, critical thinking, like really helping students be excited to be in the ELA classroom, understand what they're doing there, why it's relevant to the real world, have authentic audience for their work.

And for the teachers, I just really wanna provide, this is how you do it. You can flip to this poetry chapter when you're getting into your poetry unit and see 10 ideas that you could try tomorrow. And you don't have to read this book cover to cover. You can go in and be like, "I need ideas for discussion. My discussions aren't working right now." Okay, silent discussion, hexagonal thinking, Harkness discussion, discussion warmups, book clubs. Okay, I am gonna get a bunch of ideas, and then I'm gonna go back to teaching. Then, you can flip to the "How to respond to text" chapter and get a whole bunch of ideas for ways to engage students in ways that feel exciting, that center choice, that center student voice, that center multimodality.

So, I'm still working on it. I still have about a year before I will be turning it in but it's something I'm working on all the time and it's very exciting-

Annalies Corbin:
It is exciting.

Betsy Potash:
... for me.

Annalies Corbin:
Well, I think it's exciting.

Betsy Potash:
Thank you.

Annalies Corbin:
And I actually can't wait. I can't wait for that to be finished and to come out. So, thank you for that. So, I wanna thank you, Betsy, very much for taking time out of your day to join us. We really, really appreciate the conversation around the different ways you think about creativity. And we will make sure in the show notes that we have links to your website, links to the podcast, the creativity, the Spark Creativity Teacher Podcast.

But if folks wanna reach out, if they wanna be part of your community, which is a really big community that you've built over time, how can folks opt in?

Betsy Potash:
The easiest way would probably be by going to my website. It's nowsparkcreativity.com. And from there, if they wanna pop onto my email list, I'll make them aware of everything that's available. I run a very large community of collaborators on Facebook called Creative High School English. I share, kind of, bite-size ideas on Instagram. I share the audio in your earbuds on your commute in the Spark Creativity Teacher podcast. And then, I do, also, design curriculum. So, a whole range.

Annalies Corbin:
Perfect. A whole range of things. And we'll make sure that links to all of that are in the show notes. So, again, Betsy, thank you so much for joining us today. We really appreciate it.

Betsy Potash:
Thank you for having me.

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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.