

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #278

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

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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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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.

Welcome to Learning Unboxed. This is your host, Annalies Corbin. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And joining us today is Dr. Lisa Strohman, founder of [Digital Citizen Academy](#). She is also the author of [Unplug: Raising Kids in a Technology-Addicted World](#) and [Digital Distress: Growing Up Online](#). So, Lisa, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Thank you for having me. Excited to be here.

Annalies Corbin:

Excellent. Let's set some context for our listeners as we get started. Digital Citizen Academy is a foundation of research-based education, prevention, and diversion programs professionally designed to inform, protect, and support young children, teenagers, and adults impacted by issues resulting from technology use and overuse. Programs are designed with an age-appropriate content, and provide trackable and measurable data for school districts and organizations.

So, I think this is a very timely conversation, right? There's so much chatter about this within schools. And more importantly, there is so much information and misinformation that is out there online. So, families are seeing it, our kids are seeing it, our communities are seeing it. So, let's start really high level, Lisa. So why does this conversation matter right now? What's the urgency?

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Yeah, I think in the history of the internet being released and if you look statistically, 2006, 2007, social media hits, I've been practicing as a clinical psychologist since before that. So, I've actually been in the weeds watching how it's iterated and impacted the kids, the families, the adults. So, right now, I think what's so important is that we're actually seeing the consequence of a decade or so of impact of where kids have been online so long that their education scores are falling, their emotional well-being is at risk, they're not regulated in the classrooms, teachers are having a hard time connecting, and so we're losing teachers at a higher rate than ever.

So, I think the work that I've been doing since 2015 in the space with Digital Citizen Academy, all of a sudden now is very important. And they're very interested in having an understanding, like, how can they do this better in the educational world?

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, you know, and it's not just timely. And I love the fact, I'll also preface this, my listeners know this about me, so I love research. And I am a complete techno nerd. I love technology as well. But I also, in the work that we do at PAST, and certainly in my own work working with schools, see how managing, we're not being thoughtful, right, about what we do with all of this. And with the rate and pace that change is happening, I think it just compounds the issue. So, I love the fact that your work is research-driven.

And so, with that, what are the questions that you feel like are the most important questions that schools should be wrestling with as it relates to this? Because there's a lot of BS that's being discussed too, right? Like it's not the right question, it's not the right initiative, we're spending time, energy, and effort, and we're not getting at the heart of the matter.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

I think that it's twofold. So, the first question I would say with the research and what we depend on is what data source you look at. So, the data that I look at is quantitative, qualitative data that is like the CDC looking at whether it's correlative or causative. But I look at really robust studies that we actually show power. And so, for my research friends out there, you know, if you only have 10 people in your study and you say, "Well, but eight of them did this," that's not a very powerful study. If you say that there's 100,000, that's a powerful study.

And so, when the London School of Economics did a report, it's the Cell Phone Study in 2016, it came out I believe, they basically took over 300,000 students in Europe and looked at pre and post of technology in the classroom and they came back and said those students that had C level performance actually would drop down to a D, or those D-level students could drop up or pull up to a C. B-level students could pull up

about 8%, and A-level students would pull up about 4%. So what it showed was that the students that struggle the most are the ones that are most impacted.

And clearly, all they did, and this was in France, all they did was pull cell phones, personal devices away from the kids. They didn't take technology out of the classroom. They didn't remove the educational, robust units that we can hand to students that are protected. They just merely said, "You can't bring your devices in." And you saw this massive increase in how they did academically.

It also impacted them socially, right? They started to talk more. The lunchrooms weren't quiet anymore with students just sitting across from each other, texting or scrolling endlessly. So, it's so important right now because we have this generation and that's what digital distress is about. It really is about Gen Z and Gen Alpha, this generation from here forward, they'll never grow up without technology and why they're different.

Annalies Corbin:

Right, absolutely. And so then where's the balance point, right? Because when we step back and say, okay, from an educational standpoint, right, in a future of our citizens, our young people, our future workforce, at what point then do we teach or how do we teach the self-regulation necessary, right? Because that's, sort of, the dichotomy of the problem here. On the one hand, right, we recognize that these personal devices are having great tolls on social interactions and social development. And the flip side of it is the world that we are sending our students off into is going to be heavily technologically driven, right? And there's going to be a lot of expectations, certainly in the workplace around technology, use of technology, understanding and regulating.

It's a giant mountain. It's not a hill. How do we sort all the pieces and parts, right? Or thinking about that sort of iceberg approach. What we're looking at and talking about right now is here. And yet the majority of what's going on is beneath the surface. So, how do we think about or how do you think about that?

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Well, that's a great analogy. I think that what I'm looking at right now and probably what we just did with Digital Citizen Academy is we created a whole new K through 12 on AI-specific curriculum because that really is our future, is teaching kids how to use and be thoughtful digital citizens in this space, because what we did is that we created a need in the educational system for digital citizenship. It's in the core curriculum for the United States. Everybody has to do it.

Unfortunately, what happened was, they basically said, "Hey, if I get this printout from this free resource and I show it to my students and they fill it out, I've kind of checked

the box. And the students have now had their 'digital citizenship.'" And it hasn't worked.

And so, that's where I think... it's not just my program, there's other programs, but we have to be more thoughtful. We have to invest in the students to say, "You need to learn how to critically think for yourself, particularly with AI. And the fact that, now, I mean, globally, we're actually taking in and outsourcing our own critical thinking, because AI can do it better. And it can do it faster, and it can do it easier.

And so, that easy button is so tempting, but don't outsource your own ability to have your moral compass and your thoughtfulness and all of the things that we need to be good humans in the workplace when we get out there.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, you know, it's really interesting, and I appreciate that very much, the students that are in our facility, in our space. The fact that you have these young people who are now driving, it's an example of exactly what you're talking about, and they've never driven in a space that didn't have GPS, right? And so, if GPS goes down or they're supposed to go someplace and the address isn't handed to them, so that they can enter it into the GPS, they can't navigate their way anyplace. They have no sense of direction, right?

And I think that there's a corollary that's very similar to what you're talking about around all the other elements of being fully formed humans, right? So, it's an incredible skill. It helps our brains develop very much. So, when we can do that type of map-based navigation, and yet we're barely even teaching it anymore, much less having any expectations that the students know how to do that.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Well, and a fun kind of story, personal story that I had, that there was a day that about eight months ago, nine months ago maybe, that the Verizon system went out. The entire network went out. I was actually on the East Coast with my daughter doing college tours at the time and everything went black, right? And we were supposed to be going from one college to the other college, and I said, "You know what? We'll pull in here." And she was like, "Mom, what are we going to do?" And so, I walked her through this process of actually getting a paper map, actually opening it up, having her be my navigator, and she was like, "This is how you had to do it?"

But think about the frustration, the panic, the anxiety, all of that is like normal human energy that we have to believe that it's going to help us get places. So, it's okay to be anxious or nervous or whatever. To your point, we have to be able to go through those moments and truly figure it out on the other end.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. And there's some interesting corollaries, and I'll go back to my sort of map discussion. I love that you had this recent experience with your own child, right? Because I do think it's incredibly timely. And one of the other pieces with this that I think is super interesting, and when we step back and say, "Okay, as educators today, how do we ensure that our students can think their way through a variety of different scenarios," right?

And so, there were moments for many, many years, many generations, where we relied on those paper maps and we, sometimes, have a navigator sitting in the seat next to us; and yet, we still had to drive ourselves, sometimes, clear across country, independent and on our own. And we managed to do that also in part because we could internalize the information. Look at this map and say, "Okay, for the next 50 miles, the next hour, I have to do the following." And it wasn't just usually just driving a straight line. Sometimes, we got lucky it was. You know, I'm gonna turn off at State Road 52, 25 miles down the road. So, I need to be watching for that.

Yet our brains are not processing information the same way anymore. There's almost a physiological response in all of this as well. And I'm super curious about how some of these elements are turning up in your research. And then, I want to turn it to some of the specifics of the digital academy once I feel like we have really set the foundation here.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Yeah, I would say, that's interesting, the physiological aspects and the consequence of it is so evident when you walk into a school campus where there's a phone restriction versus one that there isn't. You can just see the energy. You can see... particularly for me, I've been doing this for 20 years, like if I walk onto a campus, I can tell you which children, particularly girls, have had social media based on the way they dress, based on the way they present themselves. There's just this very strong influence that comes in.

And so, the physiological aspect of that is they're kind of constantly trying to compare themselves to everyone else in this world where it used to be very small, like who's in our class or who's in our grade, right? It was very communal and it wasn't global. And so, it's really hard to see. I've had clients who've come in, and they're like beautiful, great artists or very smart academics, and these children will come in and they're like, "Well, I don't really know the purpose because there's better artists than me and I watch, I follow them on TikTok," or whatever it is. And I say, "Stop trying to be somebody else or compare to somebody else, and just invest in you, and trust in yourself, and really feel comfortable in the wins and the failures and all of the things." So, that physiological reset has to happen but you have to train the kids how to do it.

Annalies Corbin:

Right. Okay. So, given that, right, how do we do that? And how does something like a Digital Citizen Academy make that possible? Walk us through that piece of your work.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Sure. So, I literally created it out of my pain point of seeing people in clinical practice, I'm kind of like Kevin Costner. I just build stuff and write stuff, the field of dreams and hope that it gets used. But what I saw was that the younger the children were, the more intervention and ability to change where they saw themselves in that system.

And so, we did a pilot. We had about 10,000 students go through. It's scaffolds. I hired 18 teachers, one for every grade, a reading specialist, special needs, like all of the different teachers that I could. I had an administrator on staff. And we built this whole core curriculum that actually scaffolds with, as educators need, the kids as they grow so it gets a little bit more informative and more didactic the older that they get.

What we found in the pilot that we did was in a school district that had five elementaries, one middle school and one high school. So, we did it over three years, and those kiddos that in fifth and sixth grade had had it on two separate campuses that went into the middle school, so they all come in together, those kids had only 1% of those kids from those two elementaries had a technology-related interaction on campus.

We also have a peer mentoring program called Technology Leadership Council. They actually became the leaders and started recruiting the kids that they saw who were struggling and brought in this whole thing. Because kids don't want to listen to adults. Katie They want to be their own and the older they get. So, the principal, who's now the superintendent of that district, said to me, he said, "There's a fundamental difference between those elementary age kids that came and grew up under this program because they feel, I think, empowered, and they were given the ability to become leaders in this space and taught that their voice mattered."

And that's truly what I've done with Digital Citizen Academy. It's like, I want the kids to become the leaders. I want them to be effective policy decision makers. I want them to be able to come in and say, "You know what? I don't think it's fair that you have all my data and that I have no privacy." I want them to be able to feel that they're part of this in a partnership and not this comfortable parent-child, adult-child kind of decision-making, because it's their world that we honestly are going into, because they're the digital natives. So, that's what I'm trying to teach them.

Annalies Corbin:

And so, then, as the students progress then through this program, is there an opportunity then for them to influence what the program looks like in the next

iteration. And so, how are they engaging that? Because, you know, it's fascinating to me because I see this growth opportunity translating and morphing into so many opportunities for those kids because they have agency.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Absolutely. And I suspect, knowing kids that they are going to express that agency and their own internal requirement. You know, it's not just, "How dare you take my data and I have no control, but oh, by the way."

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, yeah.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

They definitely... I think, it's so interesting and my favorite part of what I get to do when I travel and do speaking and all of the things is spending time with the kids because to your point, they really do have a lot of really good ideas. One of the kids that I talked to said, "What about in your middle school, high school age program that we start to gamify it and we earn points, and those points could actually translate into big box agencies like Target, or Tilly's or Walmart?" or can we get those foundations to come in and actually let the kids get something for their efforts in the leadership that they're putting on there?

That's a kid idea, right? Not a me idea. Because we're trying to not just incentivize them, but bring their voice along with it and really understand the why behind it. And a lot of these kids, kids are starting companies nowadays through ChatGPT and all of the things, you know. So, we shouldn't throttle them back. We should really kind of step aside them and put guidance and guardrails along the way.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. And so, then, how did that principle that you were mentioning in the example here earlier, how did that principle then approach the impact of that? Because my hope, obviously, would be that, you know, that response is, oh, we need to have all of our kiddos in this type of programming. So, what was the end result of that?

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

That was exactly what the result was. The result was we couldn't afford not to do it in that space because we saw such a massive change. And if you see the graph, literally their entire middle school campus, there was an incident that happened, and he said, "Can you come in and talk to the parents? Can you talk to the kids?" We did one training, like one year at seventh grade, and it took their technology-related infractions, meaning phones getting taken away from kids, all of the things that they track in the school systems, from 72% of their time administratively down to 35%.

Annalies Corbin:

Wow.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

So, it cut it in half, and he was like, "I don't know how the world doesn't know this or how the world doesn't get how important it is." And for DCA, we have five lessons, they're each about 10 minutes long. It's not a heavy lift because we want it to be more so this didactic, "Here's the materials as a teacher. Here's the one lesson. You guys have all of these ancillary equipment. You can do whatever you want." We bring a parent program along the way, so parents now are getting educated.

And so, he basically has been a champion in our space. And he actually has traveled to national conferences with me. And he says he's my backup dancer. I was like, "Well, I don't know about that."

Annalies Corbin:

I love that, though, right?

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Yeah. So, we're going to be in Seattle in July at the national conference together. So yeah, it's good.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, taking the show on the road. I love that very much. So, when you step back and think about what's to come and we are not fortune tellers, however, I think it's really interesting, and I'm super curious what you're anticipating as it relates to sort of the research needs and the data that you're going to have to compile as you think about the trends moving forward. So, the next five or ten years in education, separating that out from the absolute disarray that is our current landscape, right? Setting that aside because we can't control for that. But if we just think about the technological side and the influences that are coming from that, what is keeping you up at night? What are you working on?

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Well, part of it, and when I'm working on my book on mental health and destigmatizing that because I think that now we've got children very, very young. The suicide rates and attempted suicide rates are so high, even in the elementary school ages. So, that keeps me up at night. And I know that a mass amount of that is disinformation that they're getting all of the time, that the influence went from family primary to school or community church to now influencers who are kind of spewing out to get dollars for themselves and not really thinking through.

So, that keeps me up on, how do we create a better messaging in that school system? Because as you said, we can't fix what the system has been. And we're still teaching fund of knowledge, right? You and I both know Ponce de Leon or Sir Francis Drake or these historical figures, kids moving forward don't necessarily need to have that in their brain. They need to know how to look it up and disseminate the information between good and bad, accurate or inaccurate, and those kind of things.

So, that's the part that keeps me up is, are we going to have an artificial intelligence come in and kind of overtake our own critical thinking skills? And so, how do we blend those two things? We need some fund of knowledge, so that we can critically think, but we also don't want to bypass what is going to be our future, which is this automation and assisted technologies that are going to help us moving forward.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And I think that one of the other things that's really fascinating about this is, in my own work, I am the editor of my field's largest journal, Editor-in-Chief of my journal, and here's a trend that I'm seeing, and I'm deeply concerned about it, and I think that it translates through the entire educational system, right? So, I am starting to see young professionals at the PhD level, right? So, folks that are at their first faculty positions, post-graduate school, submitting articles to the journal about topics that have been hashed out decades before with no recognition whatsoever that what they're talking about has had a previous research set, data tied to it, and deep, scarlet conversation.

So, suddenly, all is new, and that's deeply concerning to me, because there is...so it's one thing to say, "I can do some research. I can ask the questions," but how do we wrestle with that balance? And where is the tipping point from, I don't need to know everything that my cell phone can teach me because it can, it's a powerful tool, and I'm an advocate for stop teaching what this knows, and instead, let's teach higher order thinking skills and problem solving. But somehow, we've got generations of folks coming through where there is a deep disconnect with both our historical understanding and knowledge in the past and the potential that the future holds for us. So how do we reconcile that?

And I realize that's a deep question, and I'm sorry, but I'm loving this conversation because there's so many implications to what we're talking about here.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

I think you're so spot on. I remember getting my PhD, the research methodologies, and like having to go... I mean, it was the most difficult. I think a lot of people go ABD because of that section of like having to go and do all of that work and read the books and all of the things. And I mentor so many upcoming, rising... I love to mentor

individuals in the psychology space, in the education space, whatever I can do I try to give back.

And some of the things, to your point, I'll have students come to me and they want to interview me. And I'm grateful to give them my time or I'm happy to do that. But what I find is they're like, "Can you send me articles that we talked about for my report?" And I'm like, "That's your job. I'm not a researcher, I already did all the things. I have my degree, I'm practicing all of the things."

So, I agree with you. I think that this next generation, it's really indicative of the fact that they grew up with that easy button. And so, they don't do the deep work. And in my speeches and things that I talk about, one of the examples I give, you give the maps example, I give the example of the Dewey Decimal System. And I said, you know...

Annalies Corbin:

Exactly.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Right? We had to know how to go to the catalog. We had to know how to spell the word. We had to write down the number. We had to go find it on the shelf. Those process steps are the fundamental basic background of knowing that you have many things you have to do instead of it being instantaneous. And that's where I think must be where you're seeing. I think the only way to rectify that is to actually get into the higher educational systems where we're churning out these professionals and putting them in the space to be, now, leaders with other students. We've got to go upstream a little bit.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, it's a cyclical process and a problem that we are creating for ourselves, right? So, yeah, absolutely. It's interesting in terms of just sort of thinking about those pieces and those parts. So, as we wrap up our conversation here, Lisa, for the educators that are listening who are like, "Oh, my gosh. This is amazing," what is the best way to get access to the programming and the opportunity to bring this work into somebody else's school or their community environment?

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

So, if they want to go to dcakids.org, then they can put in information there, and we will get back to them if they're interested in it. I am sure you have links on your podcast. I can give you... I'm happy to have your listeners, I'll give you a link that'll let them download both of the books for free, a digital download. You don't write books because you want to sell them. I guess I don't. I write them because I want to help people in the future, so I'm happy to give you that link, which also has some resources

about assessment for teachers, for students, or for families if they want that, that actually looks at, do I actually have a problem interpersonally or behaviorally or any of the things that they're having? Like, we have some tools for that too that I'm happy to provide to your listeners too.

Annalies Corbin:

That's absolutely awesome. And I'm sure that people will appreciate it very, very much. So, last question. I know we touched on this earlier, and you were talking about the things that you were interested in, but now I want to step back and ask you the same question in your role as a mom. So, as a parent, as a parent evaluating moving forward in this space, how do you help your daughter, who's headed off to college... I'm not sure how many children you have or where they are sort of in that spectrum, but we know you have a daughter headed to college. How do you help her navigate these very same issues suddenly outside of your eyesight every day? My last one is getting ready to graduate, and it's hard.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

It's hard. I have two. They're 15 months apart. So, I feel that the work was done earlier in giving them... I didn't give them social media, they didn't have it. My daughter's graduated as a valedictorian. She was in the IB program and AP. She's very dedicated, almost too dedicated. I told her, I was like, "Go make some messes and go do those things."

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Yeah, have some fun.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Right. So, navigating the space moving forward as a college student outside my eyesight is to really go into... and I talk about our brand when I talk to students, when I talk to families, what is your brand as a family, as an individual? Kind of like, if you like Nike, or you think about Kleenex, or you think about Chick-fil-A, whatever the brand is, it stands for something. You can depend on it. There's quality behind it. There's a reason why we use it. You need to develop your own brand.

And so, when I send kids off, whether it's through my practice or my own personal kids, I always say, "Make good choices and stay true to yourself." And I think that if we can get kids to really kind of lose the noise from, kind of, that outside influence that often hits them through socials or through the world and really get them to have that inner compass and that brand of who they believe themselves to be, they're going to be okay. And you just have to trust in that.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. I love that. Thank you so much. We really appreciate, Lisa, you taking

time out of your day to have this conversation with us. And we will indeed put links and information in the show notes. And I'm very hopeful that listeners will reach out. So, thank you again for joining us today.

Dr. Lisa Strohman:

Thanks for having me, Annalies. Happy to be here.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely.

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.