



EP 186. Discovering Passions and Pursuing Interests: The Joy of Self-Directed Learning at Clonlara School with April Huard

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Annalies Corbin: [00:00:21] 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We know the current model for education is obsolete.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 today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And today, we are going to be talking about global learning communities as a positive disruptor in how we think about the concept of what is school and why does it matter.

And joining us today is April Huard, who is the director of education at the Clonlara School in Ann Arbor, Michigan. So, April, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

April Huard: [00:01:20] Thank you for having me. I'm so happy to be here.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:22] Excellent. We're excited about the conversation. And so just so we can set some context for our listeners as we get started here, Clonlara School is a global learning community with a mission to transform education on a global scale, with a highly personalized approach that fosters autonomy, authenticity, and joy in the learning process.

And they have campuses in Ann Arbor, Michigan, are opening a campus in Portugal and have around 2000 off campus students who, by the way, come from all over the world pursuing their interests and goals. And Clonlara believes that student-centered, interest led learning is in fact, the path to meaningful growth.

So, April, we want to hear more about this. First and foremost, let's start with what the heck is Clonlara? What does that mean?

April Huard: [00:02:12] All right. Yes, the name of our school is Clonlara School. That's actually an Irish word. It means meadow of the mayor. But our founder, Pat Montgomery, her father was from a town in Ireland called Clonlara. So it's a little, you know, nod to him and a way to honor him with our name.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:30] Which is a beautiful thing, right? You know, as a founder, I do understand that we tap into the things that we know that we're passionate about. And usually that's the way great things sort of happen because there's some passion or connection to it. So I actually love that nod to her father. That's beautiful.

So let's step back just a little bit, though, and sort of get into the weeds about why this particular school model? Because it's an interesting model. And we're going to sort of dig into it. And we've talked with global schools on this program before.

You have a little bit of a different twist here because you actually offer multiple ways for students to be part of the school. And I think that's the part that really intrigues me, in addition to all the autonomy and student led components of it. But let's talk a little bit about that piece, that option for how you think about school and how you access school from the particular model.

April Huard: [00:03:25] Right. So Clonlara School started as a campus program. We're in Ann Arbor, Michigan. We have a physical campus here with students who attend, you know, every day with teachers that looks a little bit more like the traditional model. And it started that way over 55 years ago.

Our founder, as I said, Pat Montgomery, really wanted something for her kids that didn't really exist. And so she created it, you know, basically out of thin air. She had a place here where she just let kids lead the process and the learning very interest led, and child centered.

The news of that kind of spread. And people started to come from a little further in Michigan. And, you know, how can we do this? We can't really drive to Ann Arbor every day, but how could we do this same thing with our own kids at home? That's how our off campus program was really born. She helped them replicate really what we were doing on our campus program. And from that little beginning, we've grown to, as you said, over 2000 students in 70 countries.

And so a lot of our students in our off-campus program are homeschooling at home with their parents, you know, like traditional homeschooling families. But we also have a lot of families who are using a micro school part of the week or a learning center or some kind of pod that they created over a COVID. Or we even have students who are in a school or a more formal type of group that are also doing Clonlara inside that program as well.

And so our learners look very different. It's a very diverse community of students who can do whatever curriculum they want. We don't prescribe a curriculum, which makes us a lot different than a lot of other schools. Parents are free to choose whatever they feel is best for their own kids and meets their own goals.

And so that's what we do here. We provide academic advisors to all of those students and families who really walk with them through the process of developing a personalized education plan and carrying that plan out through graduation.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:27] Okay. So then I can -- my brain is just churning, and I can just see my fellow educators out in about the world, they're going, okay, sounds like a really great thing. How do you make the logistics of some of the components work?

So let's just sort of take it in some some bite size pieces. So the first one is that for the students who are not in Michigan and who are not on the in-person or main campus I guess, if you will.

Let's set that aside for a minute and really talk about how does the program sort of work in and tap in from just making sure that students who are accessing the different program options from other parts of the world, other parts of the United States, from even within, as you said, you know, their existing schools, their micro schools, their home school sort of ecosystems that have been created, how are they then tracking and ensuring that the students are getting the things that they need to actually be able to ultimately complete?

April Huard: [00:06:33] So we have our own unique process here called Full Circle Learning. And it's a process that we've developed that it's really sort of like a visual representation of the learning, the natural learning process that normally happens. When as adults we try to learn something, these are the steps that we often unconsciously go through.

And so we ask students to complete these full circle learning documentation forms which we have available to them online for every, you know, if they're high school students and they're earning credit, it's for every credit or half credit. If it's elementary or middle school students, it's by project a lot of times. Sometimes subjects depending on how parents want to report those things. But that's the way that we stay really in contact with the family and the student about what is happening.

We do put a lot of trust in our parents and our families, and so that's a big part of what we do. If we didn't trust our families and develop those really strong relationships with them at the beginning, it wouldn't work at all. But we've developed ways to to work with families to meet them on Zoom, to get to know them.

You mentioned autonomy at the beginning. We really are believers in autonomy and relationship and competency, which is self-determination theory, which we really like to follow here. And so we incorporate all of those different elements into what we do so that we can track learning and really help parents reach the goals that they set individually for their students.

I'll mention, too, that we are developing our own digital platform. And so we're working with a software company right now. And so all of this will be really interactive where kids can be out and in the community on a field trip traveling and just take a picture, attach it to a project that they're working on. And we'll have all of that evidence of learning sort of already gathered inside the FCL process.

And we also have a way for them to evaluate themselves. There's a lot of -- we ask the students as they get older to do a lot of self-reflection, but also mentors reflect on the learning as well. So we do get a lot of inputs from different places.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:36] And so then as the students and the families, quite frankly, sort of progress through this process, how do you as an organization, because this is one of the questions I always get. So let me back up just a second. Right.

So the idea of student directed learning is scary for lots of folks who are only familiar with the traditional educational setting or experience. And so when we talk about student agency and all the things that sort of come from that ecosystem, if you will, it can be really difficult for lots of people either to, A, tow in, right to even get started in that, but then once they're in that space to navigate that.

And in particular, I think it's really interesting part of your model has a reliance on families. So the adults

closest to the children as they're growing and learning and experience to sort of help be a mentor and guide in both the experience and in the outcomes to some extent is what I hear you saying.

So how do you help support whoever that adult influencing that's helping make decisions around what a child's educational journey is going to look like, feel like they are competent in that space? You know where I'm going with this? Because it's really, really difficult. So how do you help scaffold that piece of the experience that's outside the student doing the thing? It's everybody around the student helping them do the thing.

April Huard: [00:10:06] That's right. So every FCL has to have a mentor attached to it. So it's another way for us to monitor what's happening, but we do a lot of education really with our families and our parents. We have monthly Zoom calls for parents. We have trainings on the FCL process. You know, this is what we are imagining. We share stories with each other. You know, here's a project that someone did. You know, this is what this student is doing.

And so I think a lot of times we learn from watching what's working for other students. Hearing those success stories at the end is really important for families who are especially just starting. You know, if I let my kid do whatever they want, what's going to happen in the end, you know?

And we now, you know, we've been around for over 56 years, so we know what happens in the end and we can tell them. Kids, we open doors for kids is what we really want to do. So we have students who want to go to Ivy Leagues, and they do. Kids get into Harvard and MIT and places they want to go, but we also help kids be entrepreneurs and start businesses and start careers or join the military or go to community college or whatever they want to do. And we show that to them, which I think is really helpful.

And when they can see for themselves the change in their students, when they are able to really take the responsibility for their learning and to really have a say in their learning, that speaks louder than really anything. Sometimes, we have kids come to us who a lot of times high school kids will say, what do you want to do? What are you interested in? And they can't even tell you. They have no idea. They don't know.

And so sometimes you have to give them that time to like, let's explore some things. Like what are you doing in your free time? Maybe it's video games and so let's start there. But when they finally see their student discover what their passions are, which maybe they never knew before, it's very powerful.

And so that experience and just really supporting and walking along with families through that process is so important. And that's why every family gets their own advisor, and that advisor will walk with you as long as you're enrolled. If they're here and you're here, you'll be together the whole way through. And so there's a lot of those supports. Clubs, we offer virtual clubs for kids so they can get to know other kids and just make that community is really important for us.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:22] Yeah. Those are very important elements, no question. So let's talk about some of the differences, if you will, between I mean, beyond the obvious, right? So there is the the on-campus opportunity and then there's essentially sort of a variety of, I guess, if you will, hybrid ways of thinking about also doing this program. But there's some pretty interesting distinctions between those two experiences.

So can you sort of compare and contrast a little bit for our listeners? Because I think they're going to find that piece, that element, really fascinating because most schools or most school concepts or programs, right, will choose one or the other as their primary driver. And you really think about this as a continuum of opportunity.

One of the things, just to sort of set this up, that was really intriguing to me that I love about this is the idea.

And for any parent who has gone to a teacher or to a school and said, hey, I have a chance to -- I'm going for work to, I'm just making something up here, to Australia and I would like to take my kids for two weeks to go with me. I'm going to do my work and then we're going to explore around Australia. Again, making something up. For only to have a school, oh, you can't do that, that's too many days, you're going to have to repeat the year.

Honestly, I had to unenroll my children one time. I own this. I literally walked in and said, I'm unenrolling my children and they wanted to hand me the record. Where were you transferring your kids to? Oh, I'm not. We'll be back in three weeks. Because you said that my kids were going to learn more with you than with me. In this case, I was going to Galapagos for work. And that's insane.

And you think about this very differently. So part of the reason I'm setting that up is because there is this space that says the world is the place where we can learn. And if we embrace the world where we learn, that is going to translate into how do we then manage learning in a fixed space versus hybrid space versus a virtual space versus something that we haven't created yet at all?

April Huard: [00:14:30] Yeah. Yes, that's the exciting thing is that we can really take kids' experiences and turn them into formal learning things, even though that's just to satisfy a requirement. Sometimes we can turn them into high school credit. You're going to Australia, let's do geography and let's do science and let's do, you know, whatever it is that you're going to be interested in, language immersion, whatever you might do if you're going to Europe or someplace.

And so we can take all of that. We recognize the value of formal learning in a school setting, in a class, our kids take community college classes or whatever they want to do. But we also recognize the value of non-formal and formal learning as well. And what we can do is, as advisors, help the families think about how does this translate into what we can report on your official documents, because it's it matters. It's important.

And as you know, sometimes that kind of learning is more impactful, provides more connections for students than just reading something, reading about Australia out of a book. That seems obvious. But and so we do let kids really follow whatever place they're at, whatever is working for them. We have a lot of world schoolers. We have a family who was on a sailboat all year, you know, those kinds of things.

But we also have kids who they want to follow the AP curriculum that their high school is doing, and they want to take all the AP tests. And that's their goals. And the important thing is for kids to own this is what I want, and this is the path I want to do. And that's where you find the motivation and the success.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:10] Right. Right. Absolutely. Okay. So now I'm super curious about how do you manage students because -- and correct me if I'm wrong. So you have some students that are enrolled in their own home schools who are also doing Clonlara, is that correct?

April Huard: [00:16:27] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:28] How do you do that? How do you mesh these two things together and it work for the whole set of required outcomes that the school has? Is this just Clonlara becomes extracurricular or supplemental or is there something more cohesive when you tie the pieces together?

April Huard: [00:16:47] Right. So if students are truly homeschooling, they might need to follow their state's home schooling laws. So maybe they need to report something and that's fine. We can work with them on meeting those standards. It's usually, not in the US at least, it's not too difficult to say, well, we have to do state

history or something like that. Okay, fine, let's plan that. That's fine. But then for the most part, we can let students really follow their interests.

So at the first consultation with the family, we sit down and say, depending on the age of the student, what do you want to do for English? What's going to meet your goals and also your interests and goals now, but also what you want to do later. So that's a big piece of the puzzle that we don't want to leave out. If you're planning to go to Harvard, let's talk about that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:34] Let's talk about that.

April Huard: [00:17:36] Let's see. We can't just do whatever we want all the time. We might have to get some certain topics and titles on your transcript, which is completely possible and doable. But if you just want to explore and really be free and see what sparks your interest, then we can do all kinds of things.

Our high school program has graduation requirements, so our kids have to do four credits of English and a credit of speech and all the things. But within that structure, we really want kids to have as much flexibility as possible paired with their post-secondary goals.

And so if we have students who are, for example, professional equestrians, they might be doing their science all related to like equine biology or veterinary science or something like that, if that meets their goals, it doesn't have to be biology, physics and chemistry. Sometimes that makes sense if you're going to a university that requires biology, physics, and chemistry.

But we also -- the other piece is that is that we let students use whatever resources are the best fit for them. So if it's an online class, if it's experiential learning, if it's a textbook, that's part of what our advisors do is help families really pull together resources and interesting ways of learning that speak to their own kids. And so we can usually mesh whatever extra requirements they might have, depending on where they live with the freedom that we can offer them as well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:05] Yeah, I really like that. And one of the things that I see that's fairly common in programs that are innovative like this, and I haven't necessarily spoken to one that works the way Clonlara does, but I do see some commonalities, for example.

And so one of the commonalities is oftentimes when you provide students with this level of autonomy in terms of just really thinking about what they want, what their goals, what their outcomes are going to be, the reality is our traditional understanding of how long it takes to do school, and I use that phrase very loosely to do school, it's not the same, not by any stretch of the imagination.

And so, for example, this idea that high school is a four-year endeavor, it's fiction. It's a fiction that we constantly choose to live because we haven't chosen to make radical modifications to a system that's really no longer pertinent anymore. So how do some of those components? Because I would assume that many of your students, they just like zoom through things, right? And then they're ready for the next thing. So is that the case? Is that what you see?

April Huard: [00:20:24] Some students are on that four-year path and that's what they want. Obviously, it's a conversation with parents, but we often have kids. Maybe they start high school earlier, which we allow, or they do high school in three years, which we also allow. It's perfectly -- you know, it's possible at Clonlara to get all your credits in three years.

We do talk with kids about what is your next step. Would it be nice to take that last year and do like an apprenticeship or an internship or something like that and then have also that experience before you go off to whatever you want to do. But sometimes it meets the kids' goals to graduate in three years.

On the other side, some kids need five years, sometimes. That's all right too. If you need to go slower, if something happens, if you need extra time, we're very flexible about ages and time periods because every kid is different. And so we want to respect the timeline and the development of every student.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:19] Absolutely. Okay. So now let's get into the other side of the questions that I know folks are spinning on, and that's the teachers, right? So let's talk about the educator experience in a school like this.

So first, what is the -- I guess, how do you ensure that teachers are prepared to teach this way? Because that's the other thing that I've had tons of conversations about. And the, help us to put this, the guardrails maybe is what I want to want to say. Does that come with a traditional teaching and learning experience in many ways, sort of give people a path forward?

It might not be, you know, a whole another conversation, not the right path forward, but it is a path, right, that is relatively easy to follow. Doesn't mean the job is easy because it's not, but the path itself is one that's easy for us to visualize and understand, and I can figure out how to navigate that. But when we're talking about schools or programs like Clonlara, that's not the case anymore. So how do you get educators ready for this experience?

April Huard: [00:22:35] Yeah, that's a good question because honestly, it is not easier, but more reassuring to have a curriculum, a guide. You're standing up and you're delivering information to people in a traditional setting that in some ways is easier to carry out, although it has many challenges as well.

Our model is completely different. So we tell our teachers, you're not really delivering information, you're guiding students to discover information and you're guiding them to find the right resources and the right opportunities and all those kinds of things. And so the teacher training is really important.

We actually have our own teacher training program that we put our advisors and our teachers through. So it goes over all the basic foundational ideas of our program, why are we doing the things that we do? Because understanding the why behind it all is really important.

It's constant talking and just being really clear about here's what we want our youngers program to be, which is what we call our K5 kids. Here's what we want our middles program to be checking in all the time. Is this what's happening? Where are you having trouble? What's challenging to you. And kids are all different, it's going to be challenging in lots of different ways every day.

When we sit in interviews, we try to convey this, like imagine a class has 12 kids and they're all doing something different, how would you manage that? But it takes a lot of time. We really try to look for the right fit. Not everybody is the right fit for this kind of education, and we know that. And they do, too.

And so we want somebody -- if you don't have the passion for the philosophy, then it's not going to be a good fit for you. You have to love kids. You have to love spending time with kids. You have to love being on all the time with kids and really being innovative and flexible and thinking about possibilities for students all the time. And so it's a process and we provide a lot of training and a lot of talking and a lot of chances to give honest feedback both ways.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:39] Absolutely. So I also can imagine that as folks are listening to you talk about this, one of the other questions that they have is how do kids and families actually opt in? Is this part of within the State of Michigan? Is this a public school? Is this a charter? Is it a private? Because it's global, you sort of get the sense that opting in can come from all over, but how do families actually get access?

April Huard: [00:25:13] So Clonlara is an accredited private school in the State of Michigan, but we're a private school, so anybody can enroll. And we also, I should say, offer this program in seven different languages. So if you speak English, you're joining the English program no matter where you live in the world. If you're speaking Spanish, you join our Spanish program.

So anyone can enroll in our program and be a student of an American private school. And the records that you get at the end, it's just a private school transcript. It's accepted anywhere in the US. Other countries, there are some things to think about. If you live in a different country and have other external legal requirements that we can talk, our programs can all talk through those and help parents understand those. But people who speak English enroll in the English program and you're just enrolled in an American private school.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:07] Okay. All right. Well, that makes sense. So as you think about the last 56 years, I believe that this has been going on, and as you look forward, and with the rapid changes that are happening not just in the US but on a global scale, and you think about the work ahead, what is keeping you up at night?

As an education director and the space that you're occupying, I have no doubt that there are things that you struggle with and think about how those relate to the work that you're doing specifically with Clonlara. So what might some of those things be?

April Huard: [00:26:52] Well, you're right that things are changing, I think, more rapidly right now. Maybe since COVID, we've seen I think COVID was a real catalyst for change in the education world. It didn't really impact our students and what they were doing off campus wise because they could just carry on. But for us as an organization, COVID was a catalyst for even better connection.

And so, now here we are on Zoom or whatever this is, it's totally normal. Every family is completely used to getting on Zoom, which wasn't really the case for us before COVID. But now, we've come up with lots of ways for kids and families to be connected, to join clubs and webinars and talks. And just really no matter where they are in the world, that's really one thing we love about Clonlara.

And so, I think one of the things is to find new ways for kids to follow these personalized plans, but also feel part of a community, a school. So we're always working on that, how can we better connect our kids around the world and even provide ways to meet up in person depending on where we are in the world.

And then I think just also spread the word and provide more access. Some people don't know, this is an option for them. We, of course, believe in it very passionately. And we want -- you know, our mission, as you said, is to transform education on a global scale. So how can we spread this even further? How can we make sure more kids have access to our campus programs which do charge tuition so that's always something that we want to bring more kids in and problem solving, those kinds of ideas and really just continue to grow to scale, to spread the word around the world.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:40] Absolutely. So same question other side. One of the things that just bring you great joy when you think about the work that you're in right now and the opportunity for kids, because my experience and certainly the work that we do at PAST Foundation, which hosts this program, is it is all around

helping kids find their passion and figuring out how to turn that into the most incredible life experience and careers possible.

So with that in mind, I'm honestly -- you know, there's a very rare is there a day that I don't just become incredibly excited and jazzed just by the kids that I'm around and the things that they're doing and the things that they're telling me. And it is, in fact, joyful. And I would imagine that's the same for you. So what are those joyful things about the way that the school and the program works that you're excited about?

April Huard: [00:29:37] Yeah, you're right. This is joyful. In fact, joy is one of our core values of our company. And so we want kids to be joyful about what they're doing. And we want our employees to be joyful about the work that we do. And it really is.

I mean, if I had 20 hours, I could tell you so many stories. And when you start to see kids, like you said, find their passion and do things that are meaningful to them, and be excited and tell you, oh, you know, this is what I wanted to do. We've had families come in and say, I think that enrolling in your program actually might have saved my child's life because they weren't thriving in whatever they were doing. And they didn't know necessarily there was another way to do it.

And when they figure it out and they see their child come back to themselves and find passions and interests, that's why we do what we do that makes everything worth it. I mean, I got an email today from a family who said our kid got into their top college at 16 years old, and this is a dream come true.

And so those kinds of stories, right now, we're getting toward May and in May, our seniors all send in all their things that we require of them at the end of the school year before they graduate. So they send in portfolios and exit exams and all kinds of things. And when you sit and you look at at this work that they're doing and you're just in awe of the things that kids can accomplish, if they have the time and the space and the freedom and the permission to follow their interests and really do what's important to them, that it makes everything worth it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:10] It does. And it's a beautiful thing, right, when we give kids the space and the grace to be all that they're capable of, it is, in fact, remarkable.

April Huard: [00:31:24] It is. Yeah. Yeah. They can do so much more than we give them credit for. I mean I've had students who -- we require a capstone project when kids are in seniors and they can do whatever they want, do something that you really want to do. And the things kids come up with, the projects, documentaries that they win prizes for and composing orchestra music and all sorts of interesting things, it's so fun to see.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:54] It is fun to see. Yeah. And it goes back to that joyfulness, right? Yeah, absolutely. Well, April, I want to thank you very much for making time in your day to chat with us and to share the story of what's happening at the Clonlara School and just really sharing that journey with us.

We'll post links and information for folks. And I encourage our listeners, please, if you're interested in what April had to say, please reach out. I have no doubt whatsoever they would love to hear from you. So thank you for joining us today.

April Huard: [00:32:31] Thank you for having me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:33] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, 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 at Annalies Corbin and join me next time as we stand up, step back and lean in to reimagine education.