

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #291

Coi Marie Morefield:

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Any building where significant learning is happening and that has housed any level of expertise in any area will be open and available to young people to opt in. That is what I'm hoping for. That is the future as I see it if the world were mine.

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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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 not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And today, we are going to be talking about the Lab School of Memphis as a positive disruptor and how we think about the concept of, what is school and why does it matter? And joining us today is Coi Marie Morefield, founder of the Lab School of Memphis. So, Coi Marie, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Coi Marie Morefield:

Thank you so much for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

I am very excited. This has been a long conversation in the making. So, super, super excited. Let's set just a touch of context for our listeners as we get started. The Lab School of Memphis is a learner-centered PK-8 private school that blends elements of Waldorf, Montessori, and unschooling philosophies. It emphasizes holistic development, student choice, and real-world learning without relying on traditional grades or tests. We can celebrate just that and have a great conversation.

It's rooted in a constructivist theory. Learning is seen as an active process where students build understanding through exploration. And instructors guide small groups, encouraging inquiry and critical thinking through hands-on projects, inquiry-based lessons, and flexible online tools. The Lab School supports a diverse community of learners in mastering concepts at their own pace.

And one of the things that I truly love about the work that Coi has engaged in, and we're going to start with this whole what were you thinking being a founder thing, because everybody knows I love to talk to founders, but I think the big takeaway that I want people to start their listening and understanding of our conversation, Coi, is really this idea that you thought of this concept, this Lab School, as a methodology, right? A learner-driven community fostering collaboration and accountability, infused with project-based instruction, all built within real-world application and opportunity.

So, that alone, let's take a moment to pause because very few are brave enough to say, "That's not only what we need and it's what we want, but it's actually what we're going to do." So, let's dig in on that, since that's always the first question I ask a founder, what were you thinking? Because founding anything is an epic lift, but holy moly, you started a school.

Coi Marie Morefield:

I did. And what I often refer to as a reluctant founder, this was not at all a plan. Even with a background in education, specifically public school turnaround work, I was no longer in education and had no desire to be in school administration, but I had children. And speaking of disruptors, right? They come in and turn your world upside down. And the thing that is, I think, really world shattering or world shaking about having children for me, I had twins. And I was in awe of these two people that were conceived together, born together, fed together, raised together, and the way their paths and their interests and their skill set began to emerge over time. It was fascinating to me.

You know, we all sort of know everyone is different, right? It's a pre-K adage, right? We're all different. Everyone's unique. But to watch that in your home, these two people side by side, grow into such very different people, I had a heightened sensitivity to how different they were and how differently I would have to parent them, speak to them, engage with them.

So, now, it's time to go to school and I'm turning over these babies whom I have grown to know deeply from just observing them, and I send them to a place who isn't spending much time at all observing them and knowing them. And I get it, there's lots of little ones in the room, but I had a parent-teacher conference. I think they were three, and we spent the bulk of our time discussing the fact that my son would not sit on the rug for 40 minutes for Mandarin. The teacher indicated, she says, "He knows

all of the answers at the end. If I let him do a puzzle he's okay but we really need him to sit on the rug. I've tried tape, I've tried circles," and she goes through this list of all of these things that she's tried to get my son to sit on the rug. And I remember thinking, "This will never work. You don't see him. I mean, he's brilliant. We're talking about Mandarin and you're concerned about the rug for 40 minutes no less."

So, that was truly the impetus for my pursuing the Lab School. There were a few other rounds in there trying to move. I attempted to move and relocate, and then attempted to find somewhere here in Memphis. And ultimately, really, God said, start a school. And I said, "Okay. Well, that's absurd. Who does that?"

Annalies Corbin:

More people than we think, especially now, right? Post-pandemic, it's not so absurd anymore in the way it was when you got started, is it?

Coi Marie Morefield:

It's not. And when people ask me, "What do I do?" I say, "Oh, my friend, you don't need me." I promise, because when I sat down at the computer that day and Googled how to start a school, I couldn't believe it. There was a list on the internet for my state of literally how to start a school. I couldn't believe it.

And so, that was in April. And by August, we were opening our doors with six learners and setting about a psychologically safe, affirming, empowering place that held young people and who they are and desire to be at its center. And we haven't stopped yet.

Annalies Corbin:

Right, exactly. Exactly. So, it's been a journey. It's been a hot minute. And lots of things as they do, change along the way in the process. And the path is not a straight one. It's always circuitous, as it should be, because the learning happens at every turn and at every facet. And it's not just the young learners. It's those adult learners in the ecosystem that you created who are learning as well, right? Learning how to do the business or the work of a school. Learning how to do the business and the work of really understanding and honoring the learner and the learner journey and the potential of that learner journey.

And then, there's all the other pieces and parts that come with starting a thing, right? It's all the entrepreneurship elements, all those skills that you definitely have the propensity for or you wouldn't have been successful, but maybe you didn't know how to do, right? And so, it's a lot.

So, let's talk a little bit about some of those pieces and parts. So, for just some context for our listeners. So, you started the school when you started with these great six learners. And so, what does the school look like today? And then, we're going to talk

about sort of the journey to get there, but I really want folks to understand, we started with this, this is what it looks like now, and it's going to be something else later, because you have already transitioned it in some ways, but help us understand sort of that piece.

Coi Marie Morefield:

Sure. So, we started with six learners. They were ages four to six. Two of them were my boys. And I believe by the end of that first year, we had grown to 11, and then subsequently 33, and then last year up to 75. So, just continuing to grow and now serving through eighth grade. And we actually added a studio or classroom age group each year. So, we added the first through third, and then fourth through sixth, and then ultimately the middle school was added each year.

And interestingly, that was out of necessity. I always enrolled learners at the very top of that age bracket for the studio knowing that if they stayed with us, we would need to create a new studio. And so, that was sort of our way, my way of ensuring that we were moving because we were moving with our learners. We were moving up, growing with our learners and their families.

You mentioned something, and I want to make sure I address. You mentioned the ecosystem that I built with the Lab School of Memphis. And I want to say that even before I had the language for that, even before I understood what that was, it was essential to the Lab School's existence. The posture of being oriented toward community, the asking, requesting community members and services to support our learning was present from day one, primarily because being so small, with such limited funds, it wasn't possible for us to offer a robust experience for our learners without that ecosystem to support us.

But second, but certainly not any less important, is it was important for me that the young people in our community, especially being here in Memphis, understood the value in our community. That they began to look around them and see people as experts and resources, and that despite what may be shared in the media, our communities are not to be feared, but to be leveraged and something full of the untapped value, right, and talent. So, that was important.

Our first year, our art class was taught by docents from the local art museum who were already volunteering.

Annalies Corbin:

How spectacular is that, right?

Coi Marie Morefield:

Yeah, and they're already volunteering, right?

Annalies Corbin:

Exactly, right.

Coi Marie Morefield:

So, they certainly don't mind a group of little people. It was joyful. We had hot lunches provided by a local restaurant because we don't have a kitchen, we don't have a cafeteria, we don't have access to free and reduced lunch. So, we partnered with a local restaurant for hot lunches.

We have a forest school program where they are out at a farm each week. And we partnered with a local horse farm in our first year. So, they also learned horseback riding, and they were out at the farm each week. And a local church loaned us the bus and the driver to get us there each week. So, again, there was no way for us to even do these things without an ecosystem, without community behind us. And that was happening long before I knew there was a word for it.

Annalies Corbin:

I feel you for that, right? Because I think that that's a piece of your journey that is very similar to the journey that we had at PAST, right? For many years, yes, those weren't the words that were being ascribed to the work and the endeavor and the experience, right? I like to say the adventure that was the PAST Foundation because it's an adventure every single day.

But the reality is that you were right, that the work happens, and it's made possible in part by, but it has meaning and context because of the architecture that is the ecosystem's approach, more specifically a learner-centered ecosystem, whole vocabulary and lexicon and push that our wonderful friends at Education Reimagined have really pulled and coalesced around the work.

And in fact, that's actually how we met because the Lab School of Memphis and the PAST Foundation were brought in to be one of the original group of the Lab School or the ecosystem cohort methods that had re-pulled together around this work to identify these entities in these communities.

I wanna dig in a little bit, Coi, some more on the process by which you found these community resources, because we know in this work that when we talk with folks from more traditional school settings and environments, one of the pushbacks we get frequently is, well, either (A), I don't know how to engage the community other than show and tell or make a donation. How do I generate a different type of relationship with someone, something, some group that is not a school? We know how to do school. We don't know how to do those other pieces and parts. And that's true. That's really a difficult thing sometimes to be able to do.

So, talk with us a little bit about your process because it has been incredibly successful. And part of that is the individual, no question. You know, I think probably the third time I met Coi, I even remember saying to you, "I want to be you when I grow up, Coi." She's amazing-

Coi Marie Morefield:

You are so kind.

Annalies Corbin:

... in so many ways. But I aspire to be Coi. So, talk with us a little bit about your process.

Coi Marie Morefield:

So, you mentioned the individual and I think, to a degree, that is true but only in terms of skill set. And that can be learned and cultivated by anyone. I am notorious for "not being afraid to ask anyone for anything." And that is true and that has helped a lot. But, really, in the spirit of a learner centered ecosystem and it was very similar to the approach with my boys, right? Spending time watching our learners, getting to know them, observing them in those early days, even now, our documentation, narrative documentation of our learners is unmatched.

And I should say, at the Lab sShool, the documentation is unmatched. So, spending time to know them, to document what we're seeing and noticing, and then thinking about what would serve them, what would move them to the next level, how do we help them go deeper around that, is the way in which we begin to look at and consider, who do we tap for this?

And then, sometimes, it was questions generated by parents. Well, what about hot lunch? Will you have lunch? And I said, "We don't, but give me some time." And then, I immediately set out and looked locally. Where are the locally owned restaurants? Who might be interested in that? And it just so happened, within three minutes of us, there's a restaurant, Inspire Cafe, who is actually a social entrepreneurship model hiring members from that community. And they loved it. And it was fantastic.

And there are organizations. Locally, we got connected with AgLaunch for our forest school program but from there, we were introduced to a food scientist who came in and did science instruction with food science and shared her book that she authored. And we were connected with someone who worked with AgLaunch, but also owned a farm. So, that ended up being our second partnership.

Now, I think, finding them is really about speaking about the work without abandon and without apology from a really genuine place. And people get really excited, and

they want to help, and they want to give you the name of someone. One of my friends had a neighbor who worked for AgLaunch, and that's how I met them.

And really, as the network grows and grows, we partnered with Tennis Memphis for PE. And so, a professional tennis player provided instruction, and all we did was buy those temporary tennis nets and put them in the parking lot, and they provided the rackets. And that was simply a call to their executive director saying, "Hey, I'm Coi Marie. I'm calling from the Lab School of Memphis. We're a small school in midtown. Here's what we're up to. We believe in project-based and experience-based learning and would love to partner and see if we could somehow bring what you do to our learners." And I can't recall a time when the answer has been no or if it is a, "I don't know if we can," there's always a connection to someone else.

Annalies Corbin:

Exactly.

Coi Marie Morefield:

Yes, that's how we set about it. What do we need here and what does that look like? How do we find that? Who within our community? And that is the very definition of an ecosystem.

Annalies Corbin:

It is indeed. It is indeed, right? It's recognizing that all of the assets that we need, they are here. How do we catalyze what's already in our community for the benefit of our learners? And how can, then, the benefit to our learners be a reciprocal benefit to the community itself?

Coi Marie Morefield:

Absolutely. You know, I mentioned as well, I think the beautiful thing about learner-centered ecosystems and, particularly, the way that both the Lab School of Memphis and even PAST is approaching it, it really pushes outside of the box thinking and pushes outside of schools, right? It gets us out of those silos. And that part of it is so important because there are so many organizations that, many times, schools are not accustomed to being a part of.

I was going to an event for the Chamber of Commerce, and I think at first glance it may seem like, "Okay, well you have a school. It's a Chamber of Commerce." That isn't really. But it was through the chamber of commerce that I was able to offer primary medical insurance because we couldn't afford to offer a comprehensive benefits package. But the Chamber of Commerce launched an initiative, so that small business owners were able to offer primary medical in clinics that they set up. And the cost per employee was small enough that I was able to do that for my team.

And I mean, they're not going to schools offering that. How would I ever have known about that? But, you know, that's what I mean. Even a local Chamber of Commerce can be super helpful. And even when it comes to infrastructure, like benefits for employees, not just what we're delivering to learners, but supporting the people that we depend on to provide these environments for learners.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I love that so much. I want to think about what do families do at the end of eighth grade? Because that's the other thing that we often bump up against, right? And so, there's a number of innovative ways we can think about education and early education, and many families make those choices. And yet, there comes a moment in that learner's journey where a transition usually, not always, but might have to happen. So, what happens?

We have a number of these same, sort of, endeavors here in our community as well. And there's a lot of conversation amongst these founders or these innovative school leaders. And it's, you know, do we do the next thing? Do we provide the high school experience? Do we send the kids out into the world with the skills that we've provided or helped them to attain? How do you think about that in your own mind?

Coi Marie Morefield:

That is difficult. I remember the eighth graders who graduated last year, their parents pleading, even through the summer, "Please do something for us." I will say-

Annalies Corbin:

It's a different beast. People in school know it's a different beast. High school is a different beast.

Coi Marie Morefield:

Very different, particularly because of the content area, background and knowledge that is required, and that also makes those salaries more competitive and that is a challenge. So, high school is hard. I'm going to go back to high school in a second, but you know what else? It's always been high school and early childhood, like that zero to five, that have always been areas I'm still to this day trying to find learner-centered solutions for. Those two, those bookends, I don't think get enough attention in the learner-centered, or I shouldn't say don't get enough attention, but we haven't yet found enough solutions. I don't see enough of that.

But yes, with high school, I don't think we had a good answer yet. Although, I will say what I recommend to parents is to look at what's available, map it out, right? Like map those aspects. What is there? What's around? What options do you have? And then, look at your learner and align what are the needs. Are they an athlete? Is that gonna

be important? Is there a learning difference that will need to be supported? And be okay with the best fit evolving.

Interestingly enough, I didn't think I would come to that crossroads until after 8th grade. Well, now, two of my children, the younger twins, attend the Lab School of Memphis, and the other two are homeschooling and doing project-based quests at Lab School and going to a homeschool tutorial and, sort of, again, leveraging their homeschool days at the Botanic Garden and days at the museum. And we've got this ecosystem within an ecosystem in our home. And on the one hand, it's like, "Well, wow. How does it happen that the children for whom the Lab School was built are not there?" But that's the thing, like being okay with how it evolves and what it means to truly be learner-centered and that we're following them, not the other way around.

Coi Marie Morefield:

So, when I think about high school, or really think about any grade, really being open to what might this look like that I'm not thinking about. I am hoping that by the time my children reach high school, local public schools and private schools will be offering a la carte courses, that community colleges, that any building where significant learning is happening and that has housed any level of expertise in any area will be open and available to young people to opt in. That is what I'm hoping for. That is the future as I see it, if the world were mine.

Annalies Corbin:

And the world is, right? I love that. I love that, love that, love that. Thank you so much, Coi. We're gonna end on that because it's like, that is the perfect sort of mic drop moment to say, we need to be in a space where our learners can pick and choose. We're not trying to limit the skills and the knowledge they walk away with. This is an effort to enhance all of those pieces and parts. We can't do that in a traditional setting alone. We certainly can't do that if we're not willing to understand the learners that we have.

So, Coi, thank you so much for taking time out of your day and sharing with us just a piece of your journey. For our listeners, Coi has so many irons in the fire. There's just so many different directions our conversation could have gone, but I am so grateful for you sharing this work because it was deeply personal, but it was also deeply impactful.

Coi Marie Morefield:

Thank you for having me. This was so much fun. I can't believe the time has gone so quickly. I was like "Wait, is that it?" But this is fantastic. You know I always love chatting with you, friend, and hearing more. I wish I could have learned more about what you guys are doing but I get a lot of that. But I love to share with you, love to dream with you, love to imagine what can be. Thank you so much for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And if our listeners want to reach out, they want to know more, they want to work with you, what's the best way for people to find Coi?

Yes, okay. Well, I am on LinkedIn. That's a great place to start, @KoiMarieMorefield. I am also on Instagram, @KoiMorefield. And my email, I can share my email, it is coimarie.m@gmail.com

Annalies Corbin:

Perfect. We'll also put contact information on the show notes for everybody, but absolutely.

Coi Marie Morefield:

Great, great, great.

Annalies Corbin:

Perfect. Well, thank you again so much, Coi, for joining us today. We appreciate you.

Coi Marie Morefield:

Thank you. Always a pleasure chatting with you, friend.

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.