

TRANSCRIPT

Learning Unboxed



Episode #277

Steven Sell:

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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 We know the current model for education is obsolete.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.

Annalies Corbin:

Welcome to another 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 Steven Sell, assistant director at MAP Academy. Steve, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Steven Sell:

Thank you. It's great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. I'm really excited about the conversation. And as we get started, a bit of context about MAP Academy, it's an alternative charter high school in Plymouth, Massachusetts. It is a mission-driven school that has created a unique and multifaceted approach to facilitating academic and personal success in disconnected youth and young adults, which is grounded in three key design elements—a student-centered educational model that meets off-track students' academic, social-emotional, and life needs, a highly supportive culture built on collaboration and respect, and opportunities to re-engage and prepare off-track youth for college and career, all of which is desperately needed and sounds fabulous.

So, Steve, as we dive in here, give us the hundred-thousand-foot view. So, what was the impetus, the when, the why, the how of starting this school program?

Steven Sell:

Yeah. Well, I think the school came out of a need that I think is an unfortunate reality in school systems across the country, that there are a lot of students that traditional high schools are not working for. And they either end up really disengaging from their high school experience, maybe they're able to stick with it, or they drop out. And the name of the school came from the founders looking at a map of the district of Plymouth, which is where the school is located, and identifying students who had already dropped out or who were at risk based on looking at certain metrics. And so, that's the sort of origins of the name.

I think the same thing is true, and unfortunately, like I said, in any district, if you pulled out a map, you can predict with just looking at geographically where certain students live, that they might be at risk of dropping out. And so, there's needs in certain areas in certain districts, more than others. But I think the reality is that if you take it back to the school level, students' needs are not being met, both academically, social, emotionally. And also there's a lack of understanding that a lot of young people have around the purpose of school. Like, what is this doing for me, right? On how-

Annalies Corbin:

What does this have to do with me?

Steven Sell:

Exactly, what does this have to do with me? They don't see themselves represented and they don't see, like, a future. And I know that schools can't... we can't deal with all the myriad of issues that are coming at us, but we do know that we can do better. And so, the design of the school is to do just that, is to do better by students and to provide them a space where they can take the time they need to move through their academics, but also take the time they need sometimes to heal from things that have happened outside of school that have interrupted or disrupted their learning. And also, give them the time they need to kind of really reflect on where they are and where they wanna go.

And some of that is really maturing and being able to have a space where they can go. And I think one of the things I've learned in my time as an educator is that that's one of the things that we're really charged to do is to hold space for young people to find their way and that's something we talk a lot about at MAP is helping our students sort of find their way.

Annalies Corbin:

And it's magical when that happens. And if we do in fact hold space, it will and can happen on a more regular sort of basis and scenario. A couple of the things that I was really excited about MAP Academy and wanting to be able to have this conversation with you is I love the idea that the students who are participating are working in

interdisciplinary learning studios with a teacher who's really serving as a facilitator largely around their journey.

And so, I want to talk a little bit about that, but add to that, just for our listeners' contexts. So, the other piece of why I was really interested in this is, so not only are we talking about students working in these interdisciplinary learning studios sort of approach, which is one that I've always advocated for and really love, but that you've also made the really strategic decision around that this is going to be competency-based.

And you mentioned time, so you're really unbundling time from learning. And for those of us that work in this sort of space and ecosystem, we know how critical that is for learners to really get it, to own it, to embrace it. And all of this, of course, translates into helping students develop, learn, for learners to really get it, to own it, to embrace it. And all of this, of course, translates into helping students develop, learn, maintain, and advocate, have agency over their moment as well as their futures.

Steven Sell:

Absolutely.

Annalies Corbin:

So talk to us a little bit about the design of these learning studios, because, you know, there's been a lot of push to get even more traditional settings to adapt models like this and embed them. You know, we don't have to wait until students are struggling and at risk of not graduating, right? There's an opportunity for us to take a lot of the amazing things that are happening in these alternative education models and really infuse some of these pieces in the more traditional setting. It won't always work, don't get me wrong, but I think there's so much value. It's like how formal learning could learn so much from informal teaching and learning, right?

Steven Sell:

Yeah, absolutely. So-

Annalies Corbin:

I know it was a lot, sorry, I tossed a lot at you, but I'm so excited.

Steven Sell:

So, there's three really key things there in terms of the academic experience for students and for teachers in no particular order. Competency, we're asynchronous, right? So, students work at their own pace and we have the interdisciplinary studio model.

So, in the interdisciplinary studios, you know, it's important to think about what that's like for an adult, for the staff, for our teachers, and what that's like for students. First from the student end, we have three studios in our school. Each studio has approximately 50-100 students on its roster. We're a small school. We have up to 300 students. We're fully enrolled, we have a wait list, and we move through that as quickly as we can, so that we don't have students on that wait list. But each studio has a set roster and we have an interdisciplinary team of teachers that works with those students.

So, if I'm a student, I have access to anywhere from, depending on the team, six to eight teachers that I can work with. And at this point, we have worked really hard to develop a sort of generalist mindset in our teachers. So, while our teachers all come to us with a certain, like, sort of special specialization, like math or science or English or history, many of them now have multiple licenses. So, if I'm a student and I have a really good relationship with, say, my math teacher, my math teacher might also be able to work with me on history, because they've also gotten licensed in history and they're familiar with the curriculum and they have access to that curriculum.

So, from a student's perspective, there's not that siloing, right? It's not like, okay, I'm moving from this room now to the next room. And going from one room to the other might be, if you're looking at a traditional school, that could be a completely different universe, right? At our school in the studios, our students can... some of them stay in one spot for the majority of the day. And they're kind of working through things they need to. And teachers might be circulating in and out of the room that they're in, or they might be kind of moving around the space themselves, right? That's the agency piece you referred to.

So, one of the things that we have to work on with our students is the ability to advocate 'cause you need to be able to advocate in a model like this. You need to be able to find that teacher that you might need support from because maybe you've gotten a revision on an assignment and they need to be able to advocate for themselves and to figure out who needs to come and help them.

So, for students, they have an incredible amount of independence. They're in mixed-aged groupings. So, we don't have grade levels in these studios. Our students are coming to us at all different points in their high school journeys. The majority of our students are coming to us already having been in another high school for one or two years. So, they've already had the sort of traditional high school experience. And so, when they come to us, if they're in their second or third year of ninth grade, technically from a credits perspective, it doesn't help us to call them a ninth grader again. So, we were taking that label away from them.

So, the experience of a student in a studio, it's not like being on a grade team. It's not like they're part of a ninth grade cohort or a 10th grade cohort. They might be in a studio with students who are.... you know, if I'm a 15 or 16-year-old, I might have some other 15 and 16-year-olds, I might have a 17-year-old, I might have a 14-year-old. So, there's this experience that you can have there from a student perspective where you get to connect with young people that maybe, otherwise, you wouldn't get to connect with. So, there's a sort of social experience there that I think is really powerful for our student.

From a staffing perspective, we've had great success with this model in terms of teacher retention. Teachers really love to be able to work in this kind of environment. That's one of the things that's clear just from our ability to retain staff. They love the fact that there aren't those silos and those walls up between individual teachers and within the content areas. So, there's a lot of collaboration that happens. We focus very heavily on this idea of collective efficacy among our adults, not just from the academic perspective, but all the teams that we have. Everyone needs to be able to have lots of space and opportunities to collaborate in order to move the work of supporting our students forward. So, just as we give our students a lot of agency, we also give the individual teachers and teams of teachers in these studios lots of agency and autonomy.

So, there's a few variables that they have a lot of autonomy over. So, one is time, how they use time in those studios. The other is space, like how they use the actual physical space. And then, the other is like the people. How are they going to use their team? Like I mentioned, a lot of the teams have... we have a few individuals now that have a license in every content area, right? So, if you have that, how are you going to use that person versus if you have a person who maybe only specializes in one area. So, the teams are able to make decisions around how they use those variables, not just like throughout a school year but like on a day-to-day basis.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, I love that very much. And I appreciate the leveraging of the skillset and expertise of the adult coaches, facilitators, educators that are operating in the space. Share with us a little bit more about the design studios themselves. So, is the theme or topic of these, is it static? I mean, there's three of them, they're different, but how are those decisions made and do they change from time to time? Do they change midterm? What does that part look like?

Steven Sell:

Yeah. So, as you can imagine, nothing's static at our school, right? We're not going to just keep doing things the way that we're doing just because. So, that's one thing. So, the studios are designed with some intention. So, I'll start with one of the three studios

is, primarily, for our over 18 students, right? So, while I mentioned we don't have grade levels, we serve students all the way to 24. So, one of the-

Annalies Corbin:

You have some adult constraints you just gotta be mindful of. A hundred percent.

Steven Sell:

Well, one of the studios is primarily focused on our over-aged 18 students. The real non-traditional, what we'd call... I mean, all of our students are non-traditional but for us, we call them the real non-traditional students—working full-time, some of them are parenting, don't have the schedules where they can come from 8.30 to 3:00 and stay for a full school day. That studio is tending to more drop-in day-to-day where you have maybe a student that comes in for an hour or two to work on some things. It's very appointment-based in a lot of ways. So, those teams are working with students on, like, "All right, what time are you coming in?" And these are, again, for the most part, young people who are living the lives of adults. They're managing a lot. So, that team is working to support students who are going through a very different sort of set of life experiences.

Annalies Corbin:

And those students, just to be really clear, those students are also looking to earn a high school diploma. Are they also, by design, opting for like a GED or are they getting a district-based or school-based actual high school diploma?

Steven Sell:

They're getting an actual high school diploma. And they're making that-

Annalies Corbin:

Okay, perfect. Just for clarity.

Steven Sell:

Yeah. No, that's a good question and that's one that we get asked a lot. So they're making the choice to do that. And a lot of the... just to stay on that for a sec, some of them could go and get a GED.

Annalies Corbin:

Sure.

Steven Sell:

Sometimes, we find that. Sometimes, that is a better fit for-

Annalies Corbin:

A better choice, right?

Steven Sell:

A better choice. But the students that find their way to us and who might be 20 or 21, and for whatever reasons they haven't been able to complete their high school education, there's a lot of reasons that they want to do that. One is just a sense of like, "I want to do this thing that I start. I want to finish this thing I started." Sometimes, we hear that from students. But another is they're getting more than just a piece of paper, right?

Annalies Corbin:

Right. They're getting more than the equivalency.

Steven Sell:

Exactly. We have very robust wraparound supports. So, a lot of our students are coming to us, yes, because they can complete their high school education, but also they can get help with things going on in their life, right? Help with housing and food insecurity, with job, right? Like helping them continue to, like, find work and employment and/or potentially counseling, right? We have social workers and counselors that can work with them. And we have external partners that come into the school to work with students on a whole suite of services.

So, many of our students who sort of fit in that profile, once they start, they realize, "Wow, this is more than just me finishing some math classes. I have some support here that I might not otherwise have. And so I think that's one of the big drivers for students coming to us who otherwise could go the GED route.

So, one of the studios is primarily serving students in that kind of situation. The other two studios are similar, more similar in the sense that they have students. We do get some students, but not many, who come to us and it's their first year of high school. So, they come to us right out of middle school, aged 14. So, those two studios have students more in the 14 to 17 range.

So, other than that, that's one of the things that we look at when we're making the studio rosters. We always have to make... sometimes, we have to make changes. So, while we might start the school year with a roster, we have to switch things around based on how things happen based on room dynamic. We'll even switch adults sometimes based on that.

Annalies Corbin:

What you need. It makes sense. So, then the studio, the studio concept is less about what's being learned in the studio and more about a deliberate set of cohort of learners who come together to learn and experience together. So, the content piece is not necessarily that this studio is studying healthcare—I'm just making something

up— and this one is studying design. It's, it's literally more about the collective set of learners that have been basically cohorted together.

Steven Sell:

Yes, yeah.

Annalies Corbin:

Okay. That's super helpful. Super helpful. All right. So, then, within that context, let's share with us just a little bit. So, maybe an example of, like, a learner's journey through MAP Academy then, what does that look like for them? Asynchronous, right? And fully interdisciplinary. But help us understand what that student experience might be.

Steven Sell:

There isn't one student experience. But if I had to think about an experience, our students come to us, like I said, for a variety of reasons, for a variety of needs. We have students that are all over the map in terms of their academic skill and motivation. But I'd say, like, an experience that I hope more students have than not is being able to move through their day and engage in academic work that they find meaningful and to do that at their own pace.

So, if I'm a student, I come in, I have lots of agency over what I'm going to do that day. I might be able to work on some math, some history. We have elective-based synchronous courses that we offer to students. So, students can opt into those. And so, that's their ability to take an engineering class or a film-making course, or engage in things of that nature, personal finance, courses where, again, these are more interest-based.

But also, oftentimes, we're trying to align those with potential careers. They're more career-focused as well. It's not just I'm going to take a film class or photography class, but, like, our teachers also work to connect to, like, 'And here's some careers that are connected to this. And here's some opportunities that if you're interested in pursuing it, might be available to you.'

So, for more and more of our students now, their experiences engaging in that asynchronous work. We have a learning management system that we use to help students track that and help our staff track that. They're engaging in some, hopefully, some what we call flex blocks, the elective-based synchronous things. And as our students get to the age of 16, we now have a very robust career exploration program.

Through the State of Massachusetts, there's a program called YouthWorks that more and more of our students have been able to engage in, where they get paid to go to class, to go to a class and to learn. At the start of YouthWorks, they're focused on learning the soft skills they need in any career in employment that they might have.

They go through a semester-based program with one of our wayfinding specialists. That's what we call the team of people that help students with career-based things and stuff outside of school. And for a student, on their day-to-day journey, they're going to that class every day that meets for an hour, and they also do lots of career exploration trips. So, they get to go out into the world and see different sorts of things.

So, we, increasingly, are providing our students with experiential learning opportunities. And the YouthWorks program is just one space for them to do that. But in the YouthWorks program, if I'm a student in that, I might be going out to Mass Robotics to see what they do there and to see some of the cool robots they're making and to meet with the people who work there, kind of learn about what they do and come back and debrief that with my teachers, talk about, "Hey, that might be something I'm interested in." Now, their teachers and the adults can help them think about, "All right. Well, if you're interested in robotics, here's some things we need to think about. We need to think about four-year college." And they can start to, like, connect what they've seen out in the world back to, like, the academic work that they're doing.

So, you know, I think more and more for our students, the experience is that combination of working through that self-paced curriculum that they have to complete the core academic work. But outside of that, providing lots of opportunities for our students to do experiential things and things that are really connected to stuff that's more authentic and hands-on and project-based.

So, what we're trying to do is find that balance for our students between those two things. Like yes, some of our students come to us, they just want to finish up their math credits or they want to finish up their English credits. But we also need to provide them with those authentic hands-on opportunities that are really going to, in my opinion, really turn them on to what might interest them or turn them on to something that they never even knew existed. So, we try to find an opportunity for students to have that sort of a journey where they can do both of those things.

Annalies Corbin:

I really love that a lot, the ability for students to really, again, embrace their own journey, their own space in the world is really powerful. Talk to us just a little bit about the idea of wayfinding, and what does wayfinding mean at MAPS?

Steven Sell:

Yeah. So, wayfinding can mean helping students find out what are some potential career opportunities for them they might be interested in. So, it could be helping students find their way in a longer-range vision. So, I gave the example of going to someplace like Mass Robotics or going to a manufacturer down the street from the school and thinking, "Huh, this might be interesting to me," and helping them figure

out, "Okay. Well, if that's something you want to work towards, how do you get there?" So, we have people who can kind of help students think about that. "All right. Let's develop a long-range vision here, and let's work backwards, and think about how you get there." So, sometimes it's that.

Another thing that our wayfinding staff do is also just help students with, like, day-to-day stuff. Like you need a job right now. Let's start looking. Who's hiring? Let's fill out that job application. Or you need to get a certification for your current job to help advance in your position. So, let's work on that certification. Or it could be like help with figuring out, like sitting down and helping them do their taxes. Like I said, we have a lot of students over 18 and are responsible for things like that. So, helping them figure that stuff out.

Or we have one individual on the wayfinding team that's focused on the college end of things, right? So, it's like helping them through the application process, taking them on... you know, she organizes throughout the school year, lots of... you know, we're fortunate to live in a region where there's lots of colleges and universities right at our doorstep basically and we have a partnership with Bridgewater State University, which is not too far away from us now where our students can do dual enrollment. So, you know, it's helping our students connect to things like that. So, you know, not just thinking, "I want to go to college," but like, "All right, let's get a little taste of that and do a class and kind of get a sense of what college life is like from an academic perspective."

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. Absolutely, yeah.

Steven Sell:

Yeah. So, they're doing lots of different things. And some of them have more of a specialty or a lane, but for the most part, they're capable of doing all of those things.

Annalies Corbin:

Yeah, absolutely. That's fabulous. So, as we sort of wrap the conversation, I guess one of the last things that I anticipate that people are wondering about as they've been listening to our conversation is, this is a fabulous opportunity for students. So, how are the students who are graduating from the program, how are they doing? Like, how are they doing post MAP academy? Is there a fairly typical percentage that go on to post-secondary? How are these kiddos doing? I mean, they're going off, they're graduating, they are becoming full citizens in our community, your community, so how are they doing?

Steven Sell:

So, that's a great question. And it's a really timely one because we're about to

graduate some students next month. First, just a quick caveat about that is like, we actually have four graduations throughout the year. So, the reason that's important to the question you're asking is this question of how are they doing and what's next for them is one that we don't just wait till the end of the year to ask. We're on a certain track because we have students that graduate in October, some of them, some in January, some in March, and then we have a larger cohort coming up in June.

Before each student leaves us, they have to create a post-secondary plan. So, one of the things our wayfinding team does is help the students with that, and they have to actually present that to a small group of staff.

Annalies Corbin:

I love that.

Steven Sell:

So, it's great. It's a really important part of what we do. It's a local graduation requirement. So, it's something we're asking our students to do. It's not something that the State of Massachusetts is asking us to do necessarily, but it's something we believe is important. So, some of our students leave us with very clear plans for where they want to go. And especially if it's something like going on to a four-year college, we have students that are going out into the world and going into college and are actually thriving and doing great. We have some students that are choosing to do two-year, Massachusetts now has free two-year college. So, that's a great option for many of our students.

Annalies Corbin:

Fabulous, yeah.

Steven Sell:

It's a way to kind of dip their toes into, like, "I'm not sure if I..." You know, a lot of our students are discouraged, unfortunately, by college because of the expense, right? So the fact that, again, we have lots of great community colleges in the area, the fact that they can go onto that has been a really great thing for our students more recently because they're able to both work and sort of stay earning some money, but also continue their education. So, we have students that are doing that.

And then, we have students that are... some of them are stuck, right? Some of them are stuck in the same jobs that they were in when they were with us and they come back. And so, when they leave, we're not just like, "All right, see you later."

Annalies Corbin:

See ya.

Steven Sell:

We do have them come back. So, I should have mentioned one of the things our wayfinding team does is work with alumni, right?

Annalies Corbin:

That's awesome.

Steven Sell:

So, we have programming available throughout the year for our alumni to come back and help learn about different opportunities that are out there for them, whether it'd be to earn certifications in certain fields or, again, like, to maybe reconsider going to a two or a four-year college if they didn't initially, and get the support they need from us to do that. Because a lot of times, many of our students don't have family members who have gone through that process. So, the ability for them to come back to us and get that support can be really, really helpful.

So, some of our students go out into the world and end up coming back to us and seeing us as a place that they can get support. And we see that as a good thing. We want that. And also, we know we can do better by all of our students. Like, as we grow as a school, we want to continue to make sure that the plans they leave with are ones that they can actually take action on. There are times when we sit through the presentations with our graduates, our soon-to-be graduates, and we feel very confident in the plans that they're presenting.

We feel like they have things in place and that it seems like a plan that they can put into action with some support. And there are times when we feel like, "I'm not sure, not sure how this is gonna work out," but this is where they are. And that's the model of the school is, we're meeting them where they are and there's a lot of work that goes into getting them to graduate. For some of our students, really, a lot of work that goes into getting them to that point.

And we are really thinking about how we can increase opportunities before they get to that point, so that when they do leave us, we have full confidence that they've had the experiences they need to navigate the difficulties that come once you graduate high school. We can't protect them from everything. We can't do that, but we do wanna make sure that every student is leaving with the skillset that they need to do whatever it is that they want to do.

Annalies Corbin:

I love that so much. And I appreciate so much that you have built in the time, energy, and effort to recognize that these lives have tremendous potential, but they can really, really easily be derailed if we're not mindful about helping provide the supports necessary to make the journey possible. So, I love that. Yeah.

Steve, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to talk with us about MAP Academy and the incredible work that's happening in your community. We are absolutely grateful for the conversation.

Steven Sell:

Oh, thank you. It was my pleasure. I really appreciate it.

Annalies Corbin:

Absolutely. And to our listeners, we will have loads of information, no doubt, in the show notes. And thank you for taking time out of your day to join us on Learning Unboxed.

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.