



René Van Blerk

René Van Blerk: [00:00:00] It's all about thinking about the place that you think—right where you are—

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:05] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:00:05] ... how the story is that's being told. There are all kind of things you notice that makes you curious about this painter, Vincent van Gogh, whom you may never have heard of before.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:21] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host. We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all but, rather, irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:56] This is Annalies Corbin, your host of Learning UnBoxed. And I'm excited to share with all of you that we are taking Learning Unboxed on the road. And today, we're actually in the City of Amsterdam. And so, we are recording live at the Vincent van Gogh Museum. And my guest today is René Van Blerk, who is the Senior Educator and Senior Curation of Education and Interpretation of the Van Gogh Museum. And what's fabulous about this conversation today, in addition to the fact that we are in an amazing city, and everything that you hear in the background is either the city or inside the Van Gogh Museum, but more importantly, we get to share with the world one of the most creative and innovative programs that I've seen in a long time. And it's called Vincent's Traveling Case. There's also a treasure hunt at the Van Gogh Museum, for those of you that like to go to museums and treasure hunt, a very common phenomenon.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:53] But Vincent's Traveling Case is special. And what's so incredibly special about this is that it's so engaging for kids. And the best part of it is the Van Gogh Museum has decided to make Vincent's Traveling Case accessible to families, to schools, to teachers, to kiddos around the world, virtually and online. So, lots and lots of resources that you can download for absolutely free at the end of listening to this session. So, what we're going to do is step out of Amsterdam and step into the world of Vincent Van Gogh with our wonderful, wonderful host and

guest today, René Van Blerk at the Van Gogh Museum talking with us about Vincent's Traveling Case.

René Van Blerk: [00:02:40] [Indiscernible].

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:40] So, how did you come with the idea of Vincent's Traveling Case?

René Van Blerk: [00:02:41] We were on a tour of some museums in Great Britain where we saw, at one particular museum in Manchester, children walking around with backpacks with all kinds of nice things to do in the galleries. Now, at the van Gogh Museum, we currently have around 2.1 million visitors annually. So, it's always a bit crowded. And we would—we were looking for a way to offer families some quiet moments in some quiet spots. We do have some quiet spots in the museums—in the museum. They're not always in front of the paintings, but that doesn't really matter. It's all about thinking about the place that you can—where you are-

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:28] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:03:28] ... and what the story is that's being told. There are all kind of things you notice, what makes you curious about this painter, Vincent van Gogh, whom you may never have heard of before, for instance. So-

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:40] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:03:41] So, we were in Manchester, and just started following some of these family groups around, and saw that it really worked very well to engage the children with a particular art they have seen or were seeing. So, we took this back home with us, and we were thinking about ways to fuse those elements into our family programs because we wanted people to be able to walk individually on their own with all these wonderful things that you would normally do probably during a guided tour, for instance. We don't have always the space for guided tours. So, families could do this individually. And then, we develop Vincent's Traveling Case, where one of the things we found out was that you can really engage children, take some things that they can take with them that look good, feel good, are tactile.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:36] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:04:37] So, the suitcase looks like a battered old suitcase than might or might not have been Vincent's. And so, it looks really good if people really wants to take this with them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:47] I want to take it home. You know what-

René Van Blerk: [00:04:48] You wouldn't be the first.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:48] I'm sure I would. And I just know—like I said, I know over the years traveling and doing so many different museums I went out with my son, and as he's grown, every time we engage in a museum or a science center that had a thing, right, that you tote with you-

René Van Blerk: [00:05:08] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:08] ... in and around the space-

René Van Blerk: [00:05:10] Yes, exactly.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:10] ... it was completely different than the places where you maybe got a flyer, or maybe you've got a video—an audio recording, which he likes those too, I have to admit. He likes the audio recordings, but it's that combination of that the kids want to touch things, right?

René Van Blerk: [00:05:25] Exactly. And unfortunately, we are an art museum, and we've got paintings that you can't touch the paintings.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:30] Right, right.

René Van Blerk: [00:05:30] We've got some other elements that you can touch. We tell not only the story of the painting itself but, also, the life story of Vincent van Gogh. And that offers us lots of possibilities to put many tactile things into the suitcase. So, it's great.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:43] And it's got that awesome sound, right? That sound.

René Van Blerk: [00:05:45] It probably is. Does it? Yeah, we'll do it again.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:47] Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:05:49] It sounds really old-fashioned.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:49] It does.

René Van Blerk: [00:05:49] Nice, because you-

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:49] It does-

René Van Blerk: [00:05:49] ... you travel in time.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:55] With you.

René Van Blerk: [00:05:55] That's fair.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:55] Right, right.

René Van Blerk: [00:05:57] So, this is—what we have, you know, all kinds of—well, these are postal bags. We used to have them in yellows. Well, I mean, they look like postal bags-

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:05] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:06:06] ... because we have them yellows. They look like postal because they're this small.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:09] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:06:09] But every bag contains some sort of activity that you can do. And, again, you don't have to do them all. You can just pick one or two, whatever you like, and then just go ahead. And it is accompanied by, sort of, a map, which explains all the activities that are in this particular suitcase. We have two different suitcases.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:27] Okay.

René Van Blerk: [00:06:28] We have different types of suitcases-

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:30] Okay.

René Van Blerk: [00:06:30] We got lots of them. There are two different types.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:32] Sure.

René Van Blerk: [00:06:33] When we developed the suitcase, initially, we had this suitcase, which was chock full of all kinds of activities, and it became too heavy-

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:41] Oh!

René Van Blerk: [00:06:42] ... for children to carry around. So, then, we decided to cut those up-

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:45] And for-

René Van Blerk: [00:06:45] ... and divide them into two.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:46] And for our listeners, the kids literally come to the guests' desk. They get to check the kit out, and they tote it around the museum with them as part of their experience.

René Van Blerk: [00:06:57] Yes, yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:58] So, for folks who can't see it, now, we will post photos and links on the website for the show, but, really, you take this thing and off you go.

René Van Blerk: [00:07:07] We're really anxious at first because children or parents are willing and able to carry this around for their whole visit.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:15] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:07:16] And they are. So, you know, just [inaudible] this time. So, as you can see on this map of all the places where Vincent went during his lifetime and all the activities I described. So, we have an introduction, Pleased to Meet You. And just [inaudible] to that. It's the one, Please to Meet You. As you can see, it's bilingual.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:38] Oh, that's awesome. Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:07:40] Totally. You for all our 70 programs in two languages, Dutch, of course, and English. So, we just have the English here. And there, we put all the information on Vincent. Unfortunately, we have to make some adjustments too because, as you can see, there's a photograph on your-

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:58] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:07:58] ... of Vincent as a 13-year-old boy. And it was recently discovered that it's not Vincent.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:02] Oh, no.

René Van Blerk: [00:08:03] It's, actually, his younger brother, Theo, who played an

important parts in Vincent's life but, unfortunately- **Annalies Corbin:** [00:08:09] But.

René Van Blerk: [00:08:09] ... we have to make some adjustments there. So—but this, in short, is telling young people about who Vincent van Gogh was because, perhaps, they have never heard of him when they come and visit.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:23] Right, right.

René Van Blerk: [00:08:23] So, the amount of visitors we have, currently, is 2.1 million each year. About 10% of that is below the age of 18. It's comprised of, I think, a lot of people. And only a small amount of those who use this particular suitcase. So, we developed it for families mainly from the Netherlands. And it turns out that it's, mainly, families from abroad using it. It's more than half-

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:49] Right, right.

René Van Blerk: [00:08:50] ... of the people using the suitcase are from abroad.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:52] You know, that doesn't surprise me. And again, just on the numerous places that I've been, you know, over the years. And I think part of it is the distance that you travel. And I really wonder, sort of, you know, what a breakdown on the demographics would be. You know, how far sometimes. Sometimes, I think, they plan ahead.

René Van Blerk: [00:09:09] Absolutely.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:09] I want to spend—you know, I want to spend a big chunk of time, and how do I use that chunk of time in creative ways, so my kids aren't bored versus I can just kind of come and go, and I'm local, and I could, you know, come and spend half hour. I can get the—the awesome museum pass that your country offers is just phenomenal.

René Van Blerk: [00:09:26] It is, yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:27] And so, you have to sort of wonder. I'd be curious.

René Van Blerk: [00:09:32] Well, the thing is we have developed a multimedia tour as well. And I really wanted it to be something that brings the family together. So, you have to just go on a discovery tour-

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:44] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:09:44] ... together. So, for instance, when you are searching for a particular program, everyone in the family group gets a different clue as to which painting you are going to look for. This works really well when you're fully into it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:58] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:09:58] We discovered that many of our tourist who are visiting first, they do come with the children, but they don't want doing the tour together with the children. Actually, they're more there to look at the paintings themselves, and the children need to do something, which, well, sometimes, keeps them afraid. Actually, my heart breaks-

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:16] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:10:16] ... when [crosstalk].

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:16] This is such a lost opportunity.

René Van Blerk: [00:10:16] It is.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:16] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:10:16] It is, exactly. So, what we're going to do in future is develop a tour, which is specifically aimed at children.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:24] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:10:24] So, they can do it by themselves, and the parents can just follow the regular tour for adults, which is a shame, I think, but-

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:32] I would-

René Van Blerk: [00:10:32] I mean, you have to cater to what your audience wants.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:35] Exactly. And it's true. It's unfortunately true. I mean, some of my most favorite museum experience is, quite frankly, they're so much better with my child because I get to see it through his eyes and his questions.

René Van Blerk: [00:10:49] Definitely, yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:49] And that has been really awesome over the year.

René Van Blerk: [00:10:51] I totally agree. That's why I'm very happy that when we get so many positive reactions on the program, many of those reactions are about, "I've learned so much from my child during this tour."

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:06] Exactly, exactly, exactly.

René Van Blerk: [00:11:09] So, that's a very good compliment for us, I think.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:10] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:11:10] But to return to our traveling suitcase-

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:14] So, each one—so, within the suitcase, then, you have the big informational piece, which corresponds to a bag. And inside the bag, then, is the information-

René Van Blerk: [00:11:25] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:25] ... and activity tied to Vincent's actual life.

René Van Blerk: [00:11:29] Yes, exactly. And-

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:30] What a brilliant idea, by the way.

René Van Blerk: [00:11:33] Oh, thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:33] I love that. It's very tangible.

René Van Blerk: [00:11:38] We developed those activities in a way that you can do them anywhere in the museum. You don't have to sit in front of a painting.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:45] That's great.

René Van Blerk: [00:11:45] It would be nice, of course, but-

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:47] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:11:47] ... unfortunately, that's not always possible because of many visitors going around. So, you would be interrupted quite often. And just go to a quiet spot, and sit down, and talk about the things you've seen or do a puzzle, for instance-

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:01] Right, right.

René Van Blerk: [00:12:02] ... of the painting we put in here, or talk about your favorite painting, or playing detective with this, the game we have in here. So, I kind of think we've been put in about seven in this case. That's quite enough.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:16] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:12:16] And again, you don't have to do all of them. It's just about getting children engaged. And I mean, as a parent, you probably know what kind of activity would suit your children in this, yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:28] Right, right, right. Well, I think it's intriguing too that the concept, you know, not only pulls in, obviously, on what's happening here at your museum, but also the components that you saw other museums utilizing the backpack. We were fortunate. My son was probably 8 or 9 years old, and we got to do an amazing tour of Notre Dame. And they have similar sort of thing. They don't use a backpack, but they have a puzzle and a treasure game that happens tied to that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:59] And the level of things he still remembers to this day. So, he's 15 now. And, you know, there's lots of things he doesn't remember. But interestingly enough, he can tell you lots and lots of things about the activities we did in these places. He doesn't remember the city of Amsterdam when we were here before, but he remembers the sites that we saw. He remembers being at the windmill. You know, he would remember he had done Vincent's Traveling Suitcase. I can tell you that he would remember it because he dug into the story.

René Van Blerk: [00:13:31] That's exactly our goal. I mean, by playing, you learn so many things. I mean, playing in a way is, I think, the best way to learn. I mean, you can see, at school, I can talk to you for hours on things. And probably, most children would pick up some things, but, I mean, it's totally different from when you're experiencing things firsthand. When you see a particular painting you like, you don't have to like Vincent's paintings. I don't like all Vincent paintings, but that's not the point. It's about triggering curiosity.

René Van Blerk: [00:14:05] And I want children to leave this museum with a feeling that they've had a nice visit, that it's nice to go through a museum, that you can see wonderful things there or things you don't like, but you can talk about those things you don't like too.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:18] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:14:20] And those are things you learn during a visit here, I think. I hope they learn because they are—I mean, when you come here, it's just—playing is a part of life.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:31] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:14:32] And I mean, I think people should play more in general. So, I hope that the adults accompanying the children will engage in the same way as their children.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:42] Well, and that's the thing, right? You know, the flip side of this is you—and it is very difficult to measure and to quantify, but I suspect, if you were able to really dig in and do that, what you would find is that if you took up a set of adults, and you sent them to the museum without a child and without this, and ask them on the backside to tell you the story of Vincent versus that same set of adults doing the museum with children actively engaging in the game, in the treasure hunt, in the puzzles, I suspect what you would find is the adults would learn far more doing the child the version than on their own.

René Van Blerk: [00:15:31] I would agree. I agree.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:32] And how many times have we seen that, right?

René Van Blerk: [00:15:35] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:35] I suspect, in your work, you see that frequently based on the question that people ask versus the questions that the children ask.

René Van Blerk: [00:15:43] Definitely. We get many, many reactions of adults who aren't visiting a museum with children but see family groups, for instance, having fun with a suitcase like this or looking at one of—we have lots of tours for school groups. We've got a theatrical tour, which is subtle in its own ways but, I mean, you can't really miss the two ladies we have dressed walking around.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:07] Right, right.

René Van Blerk: [00:16:07] They're playing their characters and singing a song with the children there. They are guiding through the museum. And lots of those adults without children join hand and applaud. They have a wonderful time. We did get—sometimes, we did get some complaints from some people who thought it was a bit too intrusive. I mean, it's a museum. But I mean, that's something of the past.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:33] I do like—yeah, absolutely. It's something of the past. And you just really would hope that folks would do a better job of engaging. I can tell you that, as an archaeologist, you know, and on the rare occasions when I was able to have visitors to my sites, you know, the questions that I got were—the best came from the kiddos, obviously, almost always, right? Because in part, they're unafraid to ask.

René Van Blerk: [00:16:57] Yeah, there are no restrictions there for them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:59] Right? So—and they're also not afraid of quiet. Where clearly, the adults are if they're finishing-

René Van Blerk: [00:17:06] Yeah, yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:06] ... the tour, right? And the other piece of it too is, I think, that when folks have the opportunity to truly engage with you in the work that you're doing, the message, you know, your public, sort of, discourse, there's there's a completely different not just appreciation, but then there's the, "Well, what's next?" There's that, "What's next?" I think that lots of places certainly I see it, you know, in places in the US and other places in Europe when I'm traveling to museums and whatnot, you do get a sense of folks, "I don't want to go to a museum." But-

René Van Blerk: [00:17:39] Yeah, "A museum is not for me."

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:41] Right? That, "Oh, you know, that's boring." And that's not the case at all.

René Van Blerk: [00:17:44] No, it's not.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:44] Some of the best things that you'll see. So, I-

René Van Blerk: [00:17:46] It probably means that they didn't come into contact with good museum education.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:51] Absolutely, exactly, exactly. And they certainly didn't know what to do with it, or they were—you know, the other thing is, I think that people are oftentimes afraid of art. We have a lot of discussions in the US, and we do a lot of work with STEM - science, technology, engineering and math. And one of the pushback we often get with that is, "What about the A? So, let's make it STEAM." And so, that's not what our purpose here today, but what I tell people all the time is don't get lost in the acronym because there is art in everything, right? And you need to figure out where it is, what it looks like, and what you do with that.

René Van Blerk: [00:18:26] I absolutely agree. I totally agree. I mean, art is a fundamental part of life.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:30] Absolutely.

René Van Blerk: [00:18:30] Art really makes your life much better.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:33] It's human culture.

René Van Blerk: [00:18:33] That's life. It's human culture, right. So, I mean, you can do maths on particular subjects or work through the STEM.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:40] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:18:40] I mean, often, it's our scientists who are working with the paintings and conserving it. And you can prepare some solutions. That's math, right? It's science, it's technology, it's—when you combine all those-

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:54] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:18:55] ... all those things. There's lots of that going around a museum as well. And so, to me, I think all those different subjects they teach at school, math, or language, or whatever, you can use arts in-

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:08] In everything.

René Van Blerk: [00:19:09] ... everything.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:09] It's in everything, yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:19:10] Really. So-

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:10] It absolutely-

René Van Blerk: [00:19:10] I am not [crosstalk].

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:10] Yeah, no, no. I mean, I completely agree. I mean—and you are I are bias, right?

René Van Blerk: [00:19:17] We are, definitely.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:18] We are in the humanities, right?

René Van Blerk: [00:19:18] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:18] And so, we can't imagine a world without those things in it. But I do think that it's really important. And we discovered years ago at class that we had a whole group of students who when you would take a work of art, and break it down into its component parts, that they could fly with that. So, for example, we do an entire program in the summertime on the mathematics of murals.

René Van Blerk: [00:19:44] Wow! That's great, yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:45] Right. And so, it's—for the parents who, "I'm sending my kid to STEM camp," "Yeah, you are. But, oh, by the way, we're going to infuse it with arts." And the kids love it. And this year, they—for the first time, they did, you know, mosaic murals. And they're beautiful. And it was fun to watch. And just the kids really got into it. So, absolutely. It's design thinking in everything we do, and it's human nature at its best.

René Van Blerk: [00:20:10] When we finish this conversation, I'm going to run directly to one of my colleagues who's working on a project with a mural. So, I want that—I definitely want to involve schools.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:19] Oh, absolutely.

René Van Blerk: [00:20:20] Let's do it now.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:20] The mathematics of murals, it's an awesome—let me know. I'll send you stuff.

René Van Blerk: [00:20:24] Yeah, I would love to do that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:24] Yeah, yeah, yeah. No, it's great. Absolutely, absolutely. So, let's go back to the to the suitcase, though, and walk me through just briefly each of the seven activities. So, why that activity, and why the key component as it relates to what you're hoping that the kids are digging in and getting out of that. So, let's start with Pleased to Meet You.

René Van Blerk: [00:20:45] You know, that's a nice question there. Vincent van Gogh is a world famous artists. Almost everyone has heard of him, like you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:51] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:20:53] Because, I mean, at the Gogh Museum, we, of course, think that everybody has heard of Vincent van Gogh, but the reality, it's not true at all. So, we need to introduce young children to Vincent van Gogh. So then, you can just start by discussing what you know and what you don't know. And if you don't know about him, well, there's lots of information in here as well. So, parents can use it in whatever extent they need to just introduce their children to the artist, the maker of all these wonderful works of art here. So, that's just the thing.

René Van Blerk: [00:21:27] And then, of course, I mean, is the information relevant to you as well? Are there similarities between Vincent's life and your life? We also have this passport in here, which my colleague forgot to give me, but I'll ask—I'll ask her for one later on, so I can take it, so we can show it on a picture.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:45] Yeah, yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:21:45] And it's just talking about Vincent's—well, the color of his hair, his eyes, and what his favorite color was, where he was born, all those things. And then, there is enough space for you to fill out this passport for yourself, so you can compare yourself to Vincent.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:03] So, the passport of your own making.

René Van Blerk: [00:22:05] We have a passport of your own making-

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:07] Perfect.

René Van Blerk: [00:22:07] ... and that you can safely travel around the museum.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:09] Yes.

René Van Blerk: [00:22:09] You can keep the passport with you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:10] Perfect.

René Van Blerk: [00:22:12] So, there's no particular order. Just this would be the best way to start.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:16] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:22:17] I mean, my colleagues will tell you that when you come to the desk and ask for the suitcase.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:19] Okay.

René Van Blerk: [00:22:22] So, I don't want children to leave with all the information off the top of their head. It's just about some particular things they like, the painting they like. So, they don't need to go home with all the paintings in their hand as well. They can just focus on the things they really like. So, that's one of the questions here. Do you see a painting you'd like to look at more or like to know more about? And then, focus on that painting. It's just cards in a bag.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:51] It is, yeah. Yes.

René Van Blerk: [00:22:52] And giving you some of the paintings, so that might be of interest to you. So, you can go straight toward to those.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:59] Okay.

René Van Blerk: [00:22:59] So, you don't need to look all over the museum for a particular painting.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:03] Right, right.

René Van Blerk: [00:23:04] It just states where you need to go. And there are questions on the card. So, if you come—if you go to this painting, and you are there, there's questions that can guide you in looking at that from the painting itself.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:15] Right, right.

René Van Blerk: [00:23:17] So, what we did, what we do in our—what we do in our tours as well, our guided tours as well is we use four signs routines from the Visible Thinking Routines from Harvard.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:27] Exactly, yes.

René Van Blerk: [00:23:30] You must know that. Because they are a very good way of starting a conversation. And so-

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:33] Exactly.

René Van Blerk: [00:23:33] And there are all kinds of nice opportunities to fantasize about, for instance, what might have happened after that particular point in time on the painting or before.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:48] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:23:48] Or if it's the middle of a story, so what would be the whole story? And your story on a particular painting will be totally different from mine probably, but that's the fun part of it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:57] Yes. And we-

René Van Blerk: [00:23:57] And they're all good. I mean, there's no wrong in there.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:00] They are all fabulous.

René Van Blerk: [00:24:00] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:01] Yeah. And again, yes. And we have of any number of teachers that we encounter that talk about the fact that they utilize Visible Thinking inside their day-to-day routines. I met a wonderful teacher several years ago. She starts every single day with that. And she literally brings a thing in. Sometimes, it's a postcard. Sometimes, it's a small painting. Sometimes, a photograph. And sometimes, it's nothing more than a ceramic vase she found, you know, at the local thrift store. And she's able to start her day that way. So, it's kind of-

René Van Blerk: [00:24:31] It makes them think and wonder.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:31] Absolutely, yes. They think and wonder in terms of elementary schools all the time. Absolutely.

René Van Blerk: [00:24:36] And we were very lucky that some international tourists [indiscernible]. And we were very lucky to be able to talk to them, and they brought it out to us. And then, we started thinking how we can use this in our museum.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:46] It works beautifully.

René Van Blerk: [00:24:47] And it works wonderful, yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:49] Yeah, yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:24:49] So, there are, in the Netherlands, a lot of museums working with this particular way of education.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:57] Yeah. So, tell us about Self-Portrait.

René Van Blerk: [00:24:59] Well, Self-Portrait is, in a way, a look into Vincent's soul, perhaps. I mean, there's only one known portrait-

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:08] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:25:08] ... of Vincent photographed or printed. So, we know what he looked like in reality at the age of 19, but we don't have any photograph of him. So, the image we have of Vincent van Gogh is conveyed through us through his self-portrait.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:26] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:25:27] And you can see here the difference. It would be a good place to do this here because they probably have all to do self-portrait. So, just, it's very simple. Just choose one-

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:40] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:25:40] ... and have a good look at it. And then, take a sketchbook and a mirror. And then, do a self-portrait yourself.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:46] And again, that's a technique that lots and lots of teachers knew. So, it's very common. It's great. It's good-

René Van Blerk: [00:25:53] It works very well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:53] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:25:53] It's very simple, you know. I mean, every classroom can probably have spots of little areas-

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:57] Yes, yes.

René Van Blerk: [00:25:57] ... you can use in your art lessons.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:59] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:25:59] And just sitting in there, have a good look. But seeing, first, a painting done by a famous artist and kind of seeing how he did this and perfect it-

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:09] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:26:09] ... plus, how he's looking, I mean, children often ask if he is very—if he was a very stern person. Like, no, I know it's pure concentration in his eyes. Why would that be? Well, it's the mirror.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:23] Exactly.

René Van Blerk: [00:26:23] So, you probably—you didn't smile the whole time while you're painting your self-portrait.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:28] Right. So, we've done some modification with the self-portrait that just because of the nature of the environment at the Innovation Lab, we have a lot of glass lab spaces. So, the entire—imagine a glass box, right, in the middle of a warehouse or in the middle of a museum. And so, we have the kids on the glass because we use it like a whiteboard, and they will be often tied, especially our art and STEM program, we start them with doing self-portraits, and they do them by drawing on reflections-

René Van Blerk: [00:27:04] Ah, right!

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:04] ... in the glass, right? And again, same thing, very, very effective.

René Van Blerk: [00:27:08] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:08] And what they walk away with it, you know, at the end of the day, is that the box, the lab, if you will, you know, all the surfaces are now a story of an individual. That's really powerful.

René Van Blerk: [00:27:21] That simple, yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:21] And the students use that as the launching point for the next thing they're going to create, which will not be a self-portrait, but will be this mural on a wall. But it gets them thinking about how they craft it, right?

René Van Blerk: [00:27:35] Exactly. And that's it. For many children, I mean, many children will come into contact with art and creating art themselves at school.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:45] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:27:45] For instant, when you come here, it's quite busy, so it's not always easy to sit in front and painting it. Probably, you could do it now.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:53] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:27:53] But it might be [indiscernible].

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:56] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:27:56] For many children, it may be the first time that they're actually doing something together with their parents in a museum. This is our aim of doing a self-portrait, but But if they decide to say, "Well, I don't want to do a self-portrait. If I can just paint-"

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:12] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:28:12] "... a portrait of my mother-"

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:16] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:28:17] ... that's fine too. It's just an indication of what you could do with it. But if you find a totally new way of using the content of the suitcase-

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:22] Right, yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:28:22] ... that's fine. I mean, it's all about triggering-

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:25] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:28:25] ... curiosity, inventing stuff. I mean, that's fine too.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:32] Is this suitcase full out? So, does the suitcase only work—so, this particular version, and I'm—like I said, I've seen iterations of this in a variety of different places, but does the suitcase only works here or can schools literally grab the suitcase and what's inside? Is it crafted in such a way that it works in other places?

René Van Blerk: [00:28:53] They could use this at schools. For instance, if they have this, we can just create it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:59] The set. If they came-

René Van Blerk: [00:28:59] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:59] ... if the teacher were to grab this set and take it back to the classes-

René Van Blerk: [00:29:05] It wouldn't be a problem. They got the smart board and just-

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:06] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:29:06] ... just project some of the paintings by van Gogh there,

then, they can do them. Of course, lots of these, we use in our guided tours.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:15] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:29:15] But we also offer them online for schools, for school teachers to do this as well. So, lots of the elementary activities we have in here, you can find in our school programs as well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:27] Any year.

René Van Blerk: [00:29:27] So, we put all of our programs online. I mean, I used to be a teacher once-

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:33] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:29:33] ... so, I was—I know what I'm talking about, but I'm no expert on a particular class-

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:40] Right, right.

René Van Blerk: [00:29:40] ... for instance, in the United States or even in the Netherlands. I mean, all classes, all children are different. And the teacher knows best what works best for his or her particular group. So, we offer the basic materials. You can do a whole lesson on van Gogh.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:59] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:29:59] ... but it's the teacher who brings all the—what do you call it? The-

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:03] The spark, the-

René Van Blerk: [00:30:03] The spark, yes. It's the teacher who needs to do that job.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:09] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:30:09] We can offer you all kinds of wonderful concepts, but it's the teacher who needs to do it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:13] And so, all of this is available for folks to download and utilize-

René Van Blerk: [00:30:18] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:18] ... in their classes outside.

René Van Blerk: [00:30:19] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:19] So, we'll make sure to provide that link. And hopefully, folks will not only do that, but reach out, and let you know how they use this.

René Van Blerk: [00:30:28] That would be wonderful.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:28] That's wonderful.

René Van Blerk: [00:30:29] Yes, I would really love that because, I mean, it's out there, and you can use it to get in so many different ways. You can adjust it, adapt it, whatever you like. And if you have a wonderful new way of teaching about van Gogh, please let us know because, then, we can incorporate that into our programs as well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:47] And how does the suitcase interact with the treasure hunt? Are they one and the same?

René Van Blerk: [00:30:53] No, but-

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:54] Because people are going to ask that question. Is this all connected?

René Van Blerk: [00:30:57] Well, the subject is-

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:57] Is connected.

René Van Blerk: [00:30:57] It's connected very clearly, but they're two totally different things. We do have a lot of visitors who return with their children. So, we would like to broaden this. I mean, we get wonderful reactions on our treasure hunt. I mean, it's, in ways, a very old-fashioned way of providing children entertainment.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:19] It's so engaging.

René Van Blerk: [00:31:20] It's engaging. It's very effective.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:21] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:31:22] So, actually, we have it in, I think, about six languages now.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:27] Wow!

René Van Blerk: [00:31:28] And actually, we sometimes get requests. For instance, we have sent a media file of one of our treasure hunts a couple years ago to someone in Israel who wants to translate it into Hebrew himself because, well, we don't have the means to-

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:43] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:31:43] ... translate it into all the different languages that are here. So, someone actually translated it into Hebrew and took it with him to the museum.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:54] Oh, that's fabulous, yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:31:54] He walked around with a custom-made treasure map for his children. It was really wonderful. It's a very very nice compliment because they enjoyed it very much.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:04] Well, it's a testament to the quality of the way that you pulled the activity together, the components, right-

René Van Blerk: [00:32:09] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:10] ... that somebody is like, "Oh, my gosh, I really want to do that, but I need to modify it, so it would work for me."

René Van Blerk: [00:32:14] Yes, and that's fine.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:16] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:32:17] That's wonderful. And we do need to adapt it every now and then because of all the situation. And the gallery is changing something [indiscernible]. And so, it's quite an active treasure hunt. I mean, this is—I've worked here for about 12 years now. And this, I think, is the 25th version we have of that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:37] Oh, my God.

René Van Blerk: [00:32:37] Well, that's fine. That keeps us active.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:43] Well, it keeps you creative.

René Van Blerk: [00:32:43] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:44] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:32:44] Definitely.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:44] And at the end of the day, your museum is as alive as you make for folks to come in day, after day, after day.

René Van Blerk: [00:32:51] Exactly.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:51] And to return.

René Van Blerk: [00:32:53] And to return.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:53] And to return.

René Van Blerk: [00:32:54] Yeah. That's why we created the suitcase as well. Because if you've already done the treasure hunt, it might that it's different when you come next time. But if it's being used, this one. I mean, this is very steady. You could do this. And every time you use it, it can be a totally different result.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:09] Well, and that's part of what I really love about it. Every single one of the activities is—because it's not static, because you didn't say you're going to go to this painting, and you're going to do the X instead. And I love that approach that you said instead, you know, kind of take a concept and what you want to do with it-

René Van Blerk: [00:33:26] Exactly.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:26] ... which is very, very different than, you know, step one, step two, step three.

René Van Blerk: [00:33:31] Exactly. Well, I can take you to the Sunflowers and talk for hours-

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:34] Right.

René Van Blerk: [00:33:34] ... about the Sunflowers, but if you're thinking that Sunflowers is not a really nice picture, then you better go to one of the pictures you really like and do something with that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:43] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:33:44] I mean, that's a way better experience than me telling you

what you should see and whatnot, you know.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:52] It's more fun.

René Van Blerk: [00:33:53] It's definitely more fun.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:54] Absolutely more fun. Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:33:57] So, I'll give you this one. So, you know-

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:59] Oh, perfect. Thank you very much. So, when you think about then, sort of, what's next, so in your job as educator and curator at the museum, how do you spend your time coming up with the next thing? I mean, so, this is here, it's created, visitors are using it, but what are you doing now? What are you doing next?

René Van Blerk: [00:34:25] Well, we are working on areas. In our [crosstalk] some point in history in 2014, there's a whole museum. So, it used to be an art museum with white walls and big black walls in this whole backyard, and that's—I mean, that's [indiscernible] is nice.

Annalies Corbin: [00:34:45] I went and visited during that period, yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:34:49] Oh, okay. So-

Annalies Corbin: [00:34:49] I remember that version.

René Van Blerk: [00:34:50] Well, we relocated temporarily to another museum while we—while the whole museum would be rebuilt in a way, redecorated. And when we reopened, we focused not only on the paintings but also on van Gogh's life story. And I was very lucky in that from that moment on, part of the museum presentation is reserved for families or some children. So, on every floor in our museum, the one floor where we are now, we have this wall where I can choose paintings and do something with it in order to engage family groups with the art. And currently, we're thinking about how to alter these walls to get more engaged families. That's one of the projects I'm working on.

Annalies Corbin: [00:35:42] That's a big project.

René Van Blerk: [00:35:44] Yes, it is.

Annalies Corbin: [00:35:45] That's a big project.

René Van Blerk: [00:35:45] Yeah, that is. And I'm also working on [indiscernible] expanding our outreach to children, wherever they are. We would like children all over the world to know van Gogh, not only because of his art, but also because with his life story, because that's the life story of perseverance, and following your heart, and doing what you think is best. Even though when people

are putting you down, still following your heart's desire to become what you want you to become in life.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:20] It's recognizable persistence.

René Van Blerk: [00:36:24] Persistence. So, very nice, recognizable persistence.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:25] Yes, recognizable persistence.

René Van Blerk: [00:36:26] I probably should remember that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:26] Yes, please feel free. I think we see great examples of that all the time, but I think it's also very difficult for folks to conceptualize or rationalize it and make it something tangible. And so, tapping into known pieces of arts and known artists, I think that gives [crosstalk]. And that's pretty powerful.

René Van Blerk: [00:36:48] It is.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:48] And especially if you can find a piece of [crosstalk] from that.

René Van Blerk: [00:36:48] That's right, exactly.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:48] Yeah.

René Van Blerk: [00:36:48] Yeah. Like you said, it's just-

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:48] Well, it's turned out really great.

René Van Blerk: [00:36:48] Well, they're not really [crosstalk].

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:48] Yeah, it's a wonderful place to come, and spend time, and be with your family. And thank you very, very much for taking time out of your day and talking with us.

René Van Blerk: [00:37:08] You're very welcome.

Annalies Corbin: [00:37:08] I have no doubt that you're going to get lots of folks intrigued and interested. And I'm thrilled that so many of the resources are online. And I do hope that our listeners will reach out too and tell you how maybe they utilize them.

René Van Blerk: [00:37:20] I hope so too. I mean, I'm learning. I'm still learning every day. I literally learn from many people all over the world. So, please, do contact us.

Annalies Corbin: [00:37:32] Oh, absolutely. Thank you very much.

René Van Blerk: [00:37:35] You're very welcome.

Annalies Corbin: [00:37:37] 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 at [@annaliescorbin](#). And join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.