



Karen Yeager

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Annalies Corbin: [00:00:17] 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 re-imagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:52] So, today, we are taking Learning Unboxed on the road. We are headed to the wonderful continent of Australia, one of those places that is all-time favorite of mine to visit, I've been many times. And today, we are going to talk with Karen Yager, who is the Deputy Head K-12 at Knox Grammar School, which is in New South Wales. And Karen will regale us with the amazing things that happened at Knox. I had the privilege of having Karen and her colleagues come and visit the PAST Innovation Lab along with some other places.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:33] And so, it's just been a true, true joy to have the opportunity to get to know Karen and what's happening, in particular, at Knox, and just at most, very high level. A couple of things that we're going to dig into that I'm really excited actually to talk about is a new program called the Academy of Global Competency. And for folks, in particular, here in the US, listen to this part. A piece of the work is around a certificate of global competency in K-12 that is achieved through microcredentials that come under the categories of agency, and entrepreneurialism, altruism, advocacy, citizenship, and deep learning, and agility. We should all aspire to be this cool. So, Karen, welcome.

Karen Yager: [00:02:20] Thank you. It's wonderful to meet and see you again. And it's just, I feel really privileged to be part of this program.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:29] Well, we are excited to have you and to really sort of dig in. And another piece of Karen's background, she is a highly decorated, if you will, educator, all kinds of accolades. Her bio is sort of a who's who of, hey, I've done this really, really cool and amazing stuff. And she's currently working on her PhD at the University of Newcastle. And part of the program we're going to talk about, I'm sure, feeds into all of that work. So, Karen, let's start with, for folks who are not familiar, give us the hundred thousand sort of foot view, if you will, about the Knox schools and sort of where and what.

Karen Yager: [00:03:08] So, we've got three campuses in Sydney, 3,300 students, one campus is a prep school, pre-K, so four-year-olds through to, I guess, sixth grade, which is about 11 years of age, and that's a coed school. And then, other's campus is just all little boys, about 700 of them, just kindergarten.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:34] Oh, my goodness. They're busy, I bet.

Karen Yager: [00:03:36] They're so cute. Imagine a class full of 25 five-year-olds, they really are very cute. And then, the city campus is about 2,600 boys. So, from right through, they're leaving here. And we're an independent school, however we have a research institute attached to that school that I started about five years ago, and it's a research institute of innovation and it's about professional learning. And we actually work with schools across New South Wales. So, public schools, Catholic schools, all sectors, it's mutual, giving back like aspiring leaders programs together, working with indigenous communities.

Karen Yager: [00:04:17] So, it's a uniting church. It's also the school which is about, you always give back. It's never about being privileged just because we're an independent school. We're really, really blessed that we have great technology here. And I have, which its got, in glue, we can do VR work. The boys are making humanoid currently, so they're up to the two arms of a human-sized robot. So, there are lots of really innovative stuff happening here. And we have cadets, 1,000 students in the cadet unit with girls from another school. And we also have tons of music and performing arts programs, et cetera. So, it's a really diverse school.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:57] Wow, that's really amazing. So, the schools and the campus are in Sydney, so obviously, the kids are coming from the surrounds. Just for those who don't know, how do students select into schools in Sydney? How does that work?

Karen Yager: [00:05:15] So, in Sydney, you've got both a public system, which is the part of education where you just go to your local area school. They've got Catholic education based on religion, obviously. And then, independent school like ours, where there's no selection test or anything like that. So, we're a very comprehensive school that is the fee-paying school. So, that's the difference to it. Now, three campuses are spread across, divided by railway line. So, boys come in from all over the place, but by bus, by their parents, or they walk, or by train. So, it's about 800 on the train coming to sit one time, for example.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:51] Wow. That's something else. Yeah, that's amazing. So, tell us about the project that you've been working on. It sounds like a couple of years. This is a real passion project for you, in particular. So, tell us about the Academy of Global Competency. The name alone should get everybody to stand up, and say, oh, my gosh, what are they doing in Sydney? I want to be part of that. So, tell us what this whole idea of yours was.

Karen Yager: [00:06:20] Well, the dream started three years ago when I was watching our ninth and 10th graders. And I call them the Peter Pan boys, the lost boys. We don't have in New South Wales or Australia, actually, a year tends to pick at all is just one when you finish in 12th grade. And so, they just had this sense of no purpose at all and they were drifting. And I looked at our senior boys, and our senior boys work so beautifully together. They achieve amazing academic results. Our little guys, the seventh and eighth graders, they're happy no matter what. But it's those 15-year-olds, in particular. They just seem lost.

Karen Yager: [00:07:01] The academic results weren't as good as what they should be. And I kind of thought, how do we give them a sense of purpose? How do we get that passion, purpose, and mastery into their lives and really make them more agile? Because the other thing I'm noticing about, I don't know about your teenagers over there, but I'm noticing our teenagers, that lack of agility. The kind of response is, just give me

the work and I'll do it. They're not risk-takers anymore like they used to be. That sense of courage seems to have gone from some of our students.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:34] Why do you think that is, Karen? Before we go any further, what do you think is the root cause of that?

Karen Yager: [00:07:39] Like the education system. Julia Gillard actually follow the New York system where we overtest. And so, we've got what's called NAPLAN, which is in the three, five, and seven, and nine, and it's a literacy and numeracy test. It's a jumping through the hoops style of testing. If we've got an end of school leaving, well, then I just see what you did, you have to get what's called an A TAT or a rank to get into university. And it's not recognizing skills beyond the academics. And it's really narrowing the choices for children. And when you've got a culture testing, you'll get teachers teaching to a test.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:21] Yes, indeed.

Karen Yager: [00:08:22] And the richness and breadth of education is lost. The other problem is that curriculum. In the secondary schools, we have outcomes that are mandatory, but also, content that's mandatory. So, if I'm a young teacher and I'm trying to teach, for example, chemistry. And I don't cover every dot, point of my content, I can be disadvantaging my students for the HSC. So, where's the time to tinker, and play, and imagine? But fortunately, we've got a curriculum review happening, which is during curriculum review, and strangely enough, a New South Wales curriculum review, which is looking at three big things, decluttering, so stripping a lot of the content away, trusting teachers, there's a novel idea.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:08] You mean that thing that they train for to let them actually find their passions and run with it with their kids? Yeah.

Karen Yager: [00:09:14] And the second one is the big ideas and concepts, which have really been missing. And so, a real push for that. And then, the third one is applied learning. Because if you look at our students in PISA, for example, our 15-year-olds have been declining in mathematics now for the last PISA tests, however I travelled four years ago to Finland and I met the writer of PISA, University of Jyväskylä. And he actually laughed, he said, I don't know why American schools and all the others actually measure themselves, he said, because the PISA test is all about applied learning.

Karen Yager: [00:09:52] The elementary curriculum is pure maths. So, our Australian kids don't do applied mathematics. It's pure, but that's all-changing. So, by 2024, we should have all these wonderful, I'm hoping, new set of curriculum. But at the same time, we've got politicians telling us, we've got to get back to the basics and teaching directed learning so that the kids are really going to learn like they did in the industrial age. So, this is real conflict for teachers between innovation.

Karen Yager: [00:10:21] But I've taught most of my career in very tough, disadvantaged communities, and loved every one of them, where if I didn't give kids the key to education, they would end up in juvenile detention or in jail, basically. And so, my passion became that you can actually still get academic excellence with applied learning and with all these great global competencies which are full and squared, and languages work, that 21st century skills, as we call them, and get kids to be agile.

Karen Yager: [00:10:51] And as a result, the last school I was that, which was nearly 30% indigenous kids, we beat both private schools outside of us and had extraordinary results because it was about getting kids passionate. So, it's kind of long-winded, but you can tell, yeah, I'm actually being one of the ones to be writing

in response to that, and I'm on the Australian Official Teachers Association as the director. So, I've been really driving that our education needs to change, the 19th century industrial age model needs to be killed.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:23] Yeah. And it's the same all over the world. And one of the wonderful advantages that I have with this program is I get to talk with really, really innovative people around the world that are doing really creative things. And it is without question. And when you and I spoke when you traveled to the States, there is no question that we have got incredibly talented and passionate people for being squashed by the system that won't allow them to engage, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:50] They can engage with what their colleagues in meaningful ways. They can't engage with their students, their families, or even in their community because they're, as you pointed out, so strong often. But there are these pockets, right? There are these efforts that are happening that are absolutely remarkable. And that is the moment we should be learning from because there is so, so much knowledge that could be shared in that sense.

Karen Yager: [00:12:13] And that takes me to widen the middle academy because I do believe you can still do it all and still get those academic results. And our definition of academic excellence is deep learning and rigor plus global competencies. It can do them and it has to be done meaningfully. So, I got a team of boys together from seventh grade through to eleventh grade. They worked for the architects and the designers. It was just a refit out again because it's an existing building. And I said, what do you want? What would you like to see? And I had the photographs of the PAST Foundation. So, I had all the photographs for them and I have them up on the Dell projector, and I showed them everything, and they got really excited. And so, they said, okay, we want man caves.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:01] Instead of labs, man caves, great. I love it.

Karen Yager: [00:13:10] Yeah. You've got the lab buildings because, for example, the rugby boy, you say, rugby team wants to meet and discuss their moves and actually view videos about playing so we can get better, then we had the really quite shy boys on the spectrum. And they said, we want the man caves where we can study together in a nice little den style. Another young man said, I want it to be environmentally friendly, so I want lots of greenery in this place and lots of light. They wanted some LED signs, so it felt more like an innovative workplace.

Karen Yager: [00:13:43] So, what we've created with the boys is a real industrial-feel place. Downstairs is, for example, the concrete, the exposed concrete, and really, the exposed ceilings. And it was funny. One of the boys, he's normally what you would call a day student, and he's a bit of a lad. I call him a lad, okay? So, for an intro. And he came up to me last year, and he said, that's my legacy. He said, I will create this place. And he said, I feel a sense of worth now that my voice is heard.

Karen Yager: [00:14:16] So, for me, education is about student voice, too. And so, the boys and a handful of teachers worked together. We worked with a company called WeWork, never do schools. They only do like Microsoft innovation spaces. We want to just break that. That's been happening in the past. And then, we started introducing new subjects. So, we introduced iSTEM, which means, they're doing mechatronics, they're doing robotics, AR work, et cetera. We introduced engineering. We have it in 11 and 12, we didn't have it in ninth and 10th grade, so we got that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:47] Oh, geez. Wow. Okay.

Karen Yager: [00:14:49] And then, I decided, I really want to write a course called entrepreneurial ethics because a lot of our young men become businessmen, they become the CEOs of the future. And it's caught a lot of famous alumni. I mean, they also become—Hugh Jackman is a Knox man. And Gough Whitlam, our former prime minister, was from Knox.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:12] Oh, there you go, yeah.

Karen Yager: [00:15:14] Very different spectrums of the graduates from here. And so, I wrote this course with a couple of teachers. And I introduced things like ethics and innovation, the business of war, because I'm teaching boys. What is the international arms trade made? What's just war theory, for example? It will start next year. Actually, over here, all of the courses have to be endorsed by what's called an educational standards board. And I didn't think it'll get endorsed because we're reviewing the curriculum, but they endorsed it, which is really exciting.

Karen Yager: [00:15:48] So, I also got 45 boys to review it. And they gave far bit of feedback that even the teachers because they're quite critical of parts. And the other really exciting thing I've added to this, I've just written the first unit to work for next year, goes for a whole turn. For us, that's 10 weeks, the model. And I'm employing former students to actually write the unit to work for it. And so, one student is working at the Australian Defence Force.

Karen Yager: [00:16:19] He's actually into computer games and he designs war games. So, he's going to write that unit for me. I've got another one who's an engineer. He's actually writing and he's working in the world of AI, Sitrick Computer Engineering. He's writing that one for me. So, it's also this continuum. And the boys in nine and 10 then feel connected to their alumni. And the other thing I'm doing, I'm working with entrepreneurs. So, for example, one of them is Patrick Chye. Have you heard of esports?

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:51] Oh, absolutely. We have launched big time here, so yes.

Karen Yager: [00:16:56] Patrick Chye is esports. He started and he borrowed about 25,000 as a young man. And of course, now, the rest is history. Patrick's going to be working with these young guys. We're working with the University of Entrepreneurialism at Sydney University. I just met with him last week. We're working with another man from China who is actually a billionaire who's done some amazing stuff. He started schools in China, in rural areas. He's a parent. So, we've got some really, this close working with industry, close working with the university. And then, I designed the Knox Certificate of Microcredentials to follow, to actually fit that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:37] So, I got two follow-up questions, because I am so loving this. I'm like, oh my gosh, I can't wait to come. I can't wait to see it. I'm going to come visit you because I want to see it in action. I want to see the kids engaged in it as it's running and doing its thing. So, my first question is, so I love the fact that you brought these boys, these kids in to be part of your design team right from the get go. We advocate for that, talk about it all the time, that we have this great missed opportunity because we believe that our students aren't ready to do, take your pick.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:16] I hear that all the time. And the reality is, our kids are amazing. We just forget to ask, right? And back to your point, we sort of drill and kill them so frequently that we squash the innovation out of them. So, I love that you guys did that. So, just clarify for me, so when you actually got to the point of sitting down and writing the coursework then, and you mentioned somebody in AI, and somebody in engineering, are those actual Knox students now helping you write those modules? Are those graduates? How exactly is the writing of these modules happening?

Karen Yager: [00:18:52] They're graduates.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:53] Okay. Folks in the industry who are coming back to help you get the content correct.

Karen Yager: [00:18:58] Yes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:58] That's fabulous.

Karen Yager: [00:18:58] So, one is only one year out. He's done in his first year of university. What's interesting, I sent him my unit of work, the one I wrote, and he critiqued it, disconnecting ideas because I'd given it to a colleague, and the colleague said, oh, I love it. This is brilliant. And I don't want that. He gives it back, and he goes, well, this is really great, but why don't you think about this? And this would be really cool. And I like your design thinking you're using, but design thinking needs a little bit of a tweaking. Now, it's changed in the industry. I mean, this is a 19-year-old boy.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:34] But it was current, too. Yeah, it's amazing.

Karen Yager: [00:19:38] Yeah. Just amazing. And he's done his research on it. And I don't know. I got really teary, because I thought, this is what learning is. It's that lifelong learning that we talk about. And just meaninglessly, we throw that out there, but it's not happening. And he's the young man who's in a completely different field, but he's so committed to education and to his school, former school, and excited by it. And then, he doesn't even know I'm going to pay him, He's got no idea. So, I don't know. It's just exciting. And I really believe since I've first started in education about what you said about students having a say. Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:24] It makes such a huge difference and I see it all the time. And since you've been to the Innovation Lab, you understand the context of it. One of the things that literally is one of the great joys that I have is, if I'm having a tough day, I can walk out into the middle of the Innovation Lab and just sit myself down in the midst of what's going on and all of the different labs. And just by being a casual but deliberate observer, the thing that I know to the very sort of marrow of my being, so to speak, is that when we toss kids a real problem, something that's tangible, it's not made up, it's a thing that has to be solved right now, we empower them to believe they can.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:14] And they can. And they will, right? And so, that notion of tapping into both the curiosity that they have, but also, the ability to problem-solve and we scaffold them to make sure they can do it well. There's all of those components that are really important, but they take ownership, and that's the other thing. And that's part of what I love about what you're talking about with this academy, is that the kids own what they learn. And the idea that you are literally building lifelong learning as one of your absolute non-negotiable outcomes, that is not what traditional education is doing right now.

Karen Yager: [00:21:53] No. And what's been exciting out of this is we have clubs after school. One of those clubs that just started as an AI club that was started by a young man, a 15-year-old, it's now got about 85 students in it. That's the group building the humanoid. And they actually sourced it. They got people to donate all these parts to them. And they contacted all these professors of university and industry. And now, they've got all these mentors. But it's that sense, I go up there in the end, and it's called the iHub, I got there and watched them. And you're right.

Karen Yager: [00:22:24] They're just so engrossed in what they're doing, and they'll argue, and they'll work together, and collaborate, and then they try again. And it's just so different to what we often see in education.

You're not defined by the industry by HR or in America by its SAT school. No, it's more than that. But what I'm arguing in education is, you can be both. And I think that's where a lot of learning, there's been a disconnect. They are going to say, you got to be project-based learning and we forget about the great academic results. My argument is, you get great academic results when you allow applied learning or inquired learning.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:02] Absolutely. I hear that. Yes. I'm going to bow to that. Absolutely. 100%, right? Because you don't want one without the other, right? The problem in project-based environment, that applied environment, whatever label you want to put on it from wherever you are in the world, the reality is that gives those kids the chance to try to tinker, to experiment, to innovate, to fail, and to learn from the thing that didn't work and to try again.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:31] And for me, when I walk into the Innovation Lab or for you into the AI build space, I'm sure it's the same sort of thing, and what I see happening over, and over, and over again is, the kids in the Innovation Lab, they don't believe even for a second that they can't. That's a completely different mindset, right? And it ends with very, very different, not just outcomes or achievement, but different points of view around the way they think about the world, and life, and their role in it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:07] And it's very tangible. The kids who've come through that environment, I laugh because one of the things that we do with the kiddos is we have industry partners and we will oftentimes ask industry partners, could you please give us a real design challenge? Something that you are working on. So, maybe you're an automotive industry or whatever, it doesn't make any difference. Give us a thing, a small thing that you're working on, a problem that you need solved, and let us come up with some possible scenarios and let us pitch it to you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:35] Let us be your R&D. And it doesn't matter that my kids don't have enough math when we start. They haven't taken that level course or whatever that we should think about the way we traditionally scaffold through. It doesn't make any difference, because in the actual applied opportunity to try to solve, they'll get what they need. And they will get it at a much, much higher level and rigor. And I laugh at folks when they ask me about this, and I said, well, at the end of the day, I would put our kids up against any R&D team in the world.

Karen Yager: [00:25:08] I agree because the curiosity has not been killed. And you're right. And their imagination that it just seems to somehow disappear the older we get. Let's face it, in this current world, we need this mindset more than ever. And it's not always the case in our young people. And I think at the moment with COVID, a lot of young Australians, and I'd say, it would be the same in America, I'm seeing a lot of hope. They've lost so much. There's no longer that school formal.

Karen Yager: [00:25:43] There's no longer what we call in Australia schoolies, which they go at all cost. There's no longer cadets, all the things that they could do. And virtual is great and we're doing it, but it doesn't make up for the fact that they were from the lights at the end of the tunnel. So, we've got to find hope in other ways and get them to see how important it is to do all those things you've just said, and to apply, to be curious, to tinker, to imagine still despite whatever darkness is there.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:14] So, as we sort of think about and wrapping that conversation, so next year, if you will, so the next term, well, you will have the first students enter the Academy of Global Competency, right? They will take the first sets of courses. And then, are they entering as ninth graders?

Karen Yager: [00:26:35] Yes, they're ninth graders. So, we've actually already got them there. They've already started this year for the first time. And walking to that space is quite extraordinary because I love Bandura's

work around social learning theory, students working together in teams and supporting each other. And it's been really, really evident here in the last couple of weeks. There's been a couple of tragedies that have happened. And I've just watched the boys. They would try, they would support each other, and they wrap their arms around each other, but you go up into that Global Competency space, you've got boys in the booth, you've got boys in the lab space, yeah, there's just buzz of excitement, engagement that's happening there.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:18] Karen, what is it that you want? So, when these ninth graders make it through, and they've completed, and they leave Knox, they go on to whatever the next iteration for them is going to be, what's your aspiration for them?

Karen Yager: [00:27:38] The first one is to be agile because the world is unpredictable. There is no certainty now. And if you're not agile, you don't cope. And in Australia, one in five males suffer from depression. So, I really want that agility. I want agency. I want to feel as if they own their learning. They have the power to be, to do, become whatever they dream. And it might be, I was working with a young man yesterday who wants to be a doctor, but he's not going to get the mark, so I said, right, you go and do an applied science degree, and then you still keep that dream alive, and then you're going to a second degree, your post-grad, and do medicine, and you're going to be the most amazing doctor.

Karen Yager: [00:28:23] And I just think they've got to keep the dream alive by that. And then, the third one is why I talk about entrepreneurial ethics, for example, their sense of citizenship, that we're part of a community and it's about empathy. And I'm seeing a lot of hatred at the moment in the world. And I think that we need to get back to that place of caring, in that place of really valuing everyone and walking in another's shoes. So, I suppose, an informed, agile global citizen and that they see themselves as part of the greater world, not just Australia, this island, as we are a part of a greater community.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:04] Yeah. And there are no words because I think that it's the perfect aspiration, right? And I think that everybody involved in education, that's exactly what they want of their students, and yet oftentimes, we're so far from being able to achieve that. And so, I think it's a wonderful, wonderful thing that you are, in fact, doing it and your students are excelling, your students are growing, and they're going to become these amazing young men who are going to go off into the world and just do incredible things. So, that's pretty awesome, Karen.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:41] So, thank you for everything that you do. And thank you for sharing the journey and the story of what's happening at Knox. I always like to close the program, and certainly, right now, in the midst of a global pandemic, was sort of a lull, I'm a teacher in some other part of the world or an administrator struggling with having a meaningful experience for my students right now in this moment, what piece of advice do you have for folks who, in the US, we're gearing up right now to start our new sets of terms, and in other parts of the world, they're already in process? What are your words of wisdom, Karen, for folks in that moment?

Karen Yager: [00:30:27] I hope they use the technology, use it to connect, to keep the community alive, whether it's here on campus or you're off-campus, that it's constantly—I mean, watching, for example, our symphony orchestra playing with nearly about 800 students, all on Zoom, all playing in this amazing harmony and synergy together, but not in the same room together and celebrating, whether it's the reverend holding a service in the chapel and beaming out to all our parents and all our students, and he rode his Harley onto the stage.

Karen Yager: [00:31:05] And to work together collaboratively as teachers, we use train-the-trainer model because we had a week to turn around. So, as teachers, we have the same agency and agility and not lose

that sense of hope and joy that we love in education, but find other ways. Don't just give up, and say, okay, it's not face-to-face, but find a way to connect. And technology is your greatest tool. Zoom, to me, has just been incredible. And we did all the interviews with parents.

Karen Yager: [00:31:38] We've done everything by Zoom and it's a powerful way to do it. We're even going to have our seventh grade invitation next year. We're going to have what's called the Knox vibe moments, where [indecipherable] is online with parents, everything virtually. So, I just think, have an open mindset no matter what you do and just think we can find a way. Teachers are so committed to their students. They're all about caring and supporting their students, and just find a way to make learning happen anywhere, any time.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:09] Absolutely. Great words of advice and wisdom. So, thank you, Karen, so much for spending time with us today. I appreciate it.

Karen Yager: [00:32:17] Thank you so much. It's a pleasure.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:21] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media @AnnaliesCorbin and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to re-imagine education.