



## **Mara Krechevsky & Fred Burton**

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**Annalies Corbin:** [00:00:14] 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:** [00:00:49] So, this week on Learning Unboxed, we are going to talk about progressive education and the intersection with Project Zero and a whole lot of real creative people out there in the world trying to make teaching, learning, future of work very relevant and right now. But the secret to this conversation is this work has been going on for many years and it's having quite the impact. So, we want to dig into that as well. So, joining us today, Mara Krechevsky, who is joining us.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:22] She is a senior researcher from Project Zero, which is one of the research centers at Harvard Graduate School of Education. And we've talked about Project Zero actually before when we spoke with the Columbus Museum of Art and the work that they've been doing it, but we will revisit that just a little bit with Mara. And Project Zero's mission is to understand in enhance learning, thinking, and creativity for individuals and groups in the arts and other disciplines. So, welcome.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:01:49] Thank you.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:50] And joining Mara is a local legend in Central Ohio, Dr. Fred Burton, who has spent 44 years actually as an educator in progressive education. And the reason that I know him, and so many in town is because for 13 years, he was the principal of Wickliffe Progressive Elementary School, which is a public school in Upper Arlington, Ohio. And it is known locally, regionally, statewide as one of the gems in elementary education in the state. And we hold it up all the time as the exemplar of what you want to see happening in elementary school. So, Fred, we're really excited to have you join us today as well.

**Fred Burton:** [00:02:31] Glad to be here.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:02:32] So, I want to get started first and foremost, and either one of you can jump in since you had some pre-conversation around who is going to do what, I don't want to take anyone's thunder, but I really do want to spend a lot of time talking about this concept of, what the heck is progressive education? And why do we want to spend time thinking about that? So, for our listeners, what's progressive education?

**Fred Burton:** [00:02:57] Well, I don't mind starting on that. Progressive education, I mean, you can look at it historically, progressive education was part of the early 1900s, the progressive movement in the United States. So, it was kind of a subset. There were settlement houses like the Hull House in Chicago, and just a lot of immigrants coming in, that sort of thing. But what I really pushed at Wickliffe Progressive School was living the progressive tradition today. So, we could talk a lot about Dewey, and Francis Parker, and all of those, but what does it mean to live those progressive values?

**Fred Burton:** [00:03:39] And we created a set of 10 principles at Wickliffe to guide us. So, no matter what was happening out in the larger world, that these were kind of core principles that we would revisit every once in a while. One example or one principle would be respecting diversity among children, and variation in their development, and putting an emphasis on how children learn. So, I think I would talk about, what does it look like today? And maybe we can talk a little bit more about that as we go. I don't know, Mara, if you want to add anything, a take to that or not.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:04:16] Yeah. I think one of the key tenets of progressive education that we've thought a lot about and explored in various projects at Project Zero is this notion of understanding as a performance. Understanding or performative understanding is something that you do with what you learn and it's not something you have or possess. And that just informs everything that we do, as well as this phrase that Dave Perkins often likes to say, which is that learning is a consequence of thinking. And so, again, a lot of what we do is look at how to support thinking for children, for adults, how to create cultures of thinking in the classroom.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:05:01] Yeah. And let's dig into that just a little bit because I want to make sure that our listeners have a really good context for the intersection between Fred and Fred's work, for example, at Wickliffe and the broader progressive education movement generally, and specifically, the work of Project Zero, because, again, we keep bumping up against Project Zero on this program because of the variety of different groups that we talk to that are also utilizing or part of that effort. So, help our listeners who might not have listened before understand the work of Project Zero and how it intersects here.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:05:39] Project Zero has been around for over 50 years. And we actually were started by Nelson Goodman, who was a philosopher of the arts. And at the time, because of the launching of Sputnik, there was a lot of work that was being done in science education, but very little was known about the arts and how they develop in children. So, Goodman said, we were starting from zero. But since then, we've expanded and we look at all disciplines. And we have a wide range of projects, but across all of those projects, we're always asking the same three questions. First is, what does learning look like?

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:06:15] Second is, how and where do thinking and learning thrive? And third is, and Dave Perkins would say this as the hardest question in education, what's worth learning today and tomorrow? And so, really, across our projects, we are looking to support—we see learning as fundamentally social. And so, we're looking to support both children and adults, and question people's assumptions about who's the learner and who's the teacher in the classroom in order to create these thriving cultures of thinking that will result in learning and this particularly important notion of transfer, that children are able to apply what they've learned in one setting to a new context.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:07:04] Which is critically important if you think about sort of a lifelong aspect and impact of this collective work. And it's perfect segue because I watch the impact of the work that's happened locally in the space on a fairly regular basis. Fred, you may not realize it, but a fair number of kids who went to Wickliffe have found themselves at PAST and PAST Innovation Lab or in our partner in-residence school, Metro. So, I

see a fair number of those kids and have historically over a number of years since the STEM program here is about 12 years old, I think at this point now, it's been a while.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:07:47] But over those 12 years, I have seen any number of the kiddos that have gone through that experience, and I think that's a really great space because I see the difference, a marked difference between the kids who have come out of the progressive experience, and the teaching and learning, and the processes that you've put in place at Wickliffe is very, very different than the kids who are coming from more of a traditional setting. And the place I see it more often than not is the kiddos that have come out of the Wickliffe experience, they demonstrate three key things.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:08:25] First and foremost, they're fearless speakers. They are comfortable sharing what they know or sharing what they think, and that is not the case with kids broadly coming out of traditional settings, when you put them in an environment that has an expectation that they know how to think critically and problem-solve, but more importantly, that they know how to work collaboratively and to share out. And that's one of the things that I definitely see coming out of the kids who've had this experience. I also see that they're great problem solvers. And the other piece that I see is they value diversity in ways that I don't always see from other kids.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:09:07] And so, we'll get into the weeds of how you managed that in a school setting, but I think the bigger question that many of our educators are going to ask is, as a principal or as a leader in a building that is teaching and learning this way, how do you ensure that your faculty is with you? Because a lot of what's happening right now is there's lots of transition happening in education and COVID has only accelerated that. And the question I get every single day is, how do I get everybody to go down the road, whatever the new road is going to be with me? How do you do that, Fred?

**Fred Burton:** [00:09:44] Yeah, I love that. I love that question. And I love your observations as well. I mean, for me, that's like the best test we could give our kids, is what you're actually observing versus what's measurable because not everything that's valuable is measurable. So, one of the first thing—and I'll start talking—and, Mara, feel free to kind of bust in here, because you spent a lot of time with me, and the faculty, and the kids, and parents at Wickliffe. A good starting point is that I never hired the best teachers in all the years that I was there.

**Fred Burton:** [00:10:21] I never tried to hire the best teachers. I always tried to hire the best learners because the best learners were always the best teachers. And so, if you're going to model something for kids, you would have to be a risk taker. You have to be willing to embrace diversity, and collaborate, and do all of those things at the adult level. In terms of principals, I've mentored a few. And principal ships and leaders that go bad are usually ones that come into a setting, and say, okay, here's what I want to change, and kind of ignoring what's already right there in front of them.

**Fred Burton:** [00:11:00] And I kind of liken it, too, that being a principal as a bulldozer versus a push lawnmower, a bulldozer you set up really high in the seat, and you kind of look around, and you just kind of run over everything, where a push lawnmower, which I'm thinking of my own front yard, which is really bumpy. And so, living in schools and in community can be really bumpy stuff, but in the push idea of a mower, too, is that I always try to, once you hire the best learners, you always try to push them as much as possible while protecting them from things that aren't really all that important.

**Fred Burton:** [00:11:40] I know there would be things that, administrative meetings which would raise my blood pressure, but how I left that meeting and came back to Wickliffe, now, I had a choice. I could raise everybody else's blood pressure, let me call a meeting really quick and get everybody else, but instead, we just

continually try to put the emphasis by learning, on the process of learning. And that's what the 10 principles were for, to ground us, remember what are the great success indicators for a school with high standards? And I asked a group of parents a while back, what kind of standards do you—what are the highest standards you want for your child?

**Fred Burton:** [00:12:21] And I've asked hundreds actually of parents this, and none of them have ever said, well, I want them all to be in the 99th percentile on this particular test. They all say things like, you just observed and we're setting, I want it to be collaborative, I want them to value diversity, I want them to be kind, and I want them to be engaged, and all of those kinds of things. So, if you hire really good people, and if you bring parents in as real educators and not just partners, and I can talk about that later. So, I'm going to stop talking right now and just see, Mara, if you want to add anything to that.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:12:59] I just wanted to add one anecdote because I remember going to Wickliffe in tomorrow's story, and one of the teachers outside of her classroom had a big piece of chart paper, and it asked, what kind of learner do you want your child to be? And parents were signing it. And one of the responses was, any kind. And I just loved that because of the acknowledgement, as long as they're learning, there are many different ways to go about it, and any kind would be just fine.

**Fred Burton:** [00:13:30] Yeah.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:13:30] So then, if you sort of—to double down, I guess, on that, how do you respond to the parents, or the community, or quite frankly, even other teachers, or administrators who will say, hey, what we've been doing or the traditional educational model is just fine, why do we need this other thing? What does that conversation look like? I'm tempted to say, how do you convince them otherwise? But I've been at this long enough to know that you can't do that. They have to choose to be there with you. And oftentimes, folks, that's not the choice that they've made for a whole host of reasons. So, what does that conversation look like?

**Fred Burton:** [00:14:15] Right. And so, at Wickliffe, we would have kind of a continual flow of prospective parents within our district and people who lived outside of our district who were willing to move into our district. And one day, I would hear things like, well, the parent at Grapevine has said that Wickliffe is really for special needs students because you really value the individual, and you just aren't rigid, and that sort of thing. The next day, I would hear a parent say, I hear Wickliffe is for the gifted kids because you let them go as far as you can.

**Fred Burton:** [00:14:54] And basically, what I would say to them is that Wickliffe is for all children, it's not for adults or parents. And so, really, the parent piece and their passion can buy into the values. I don't want to spend 98% of my time either with teachers or parents trying to convince a small percentage of people that they ought to see things my way, I just want to create this culture that they go, wow, I want to be part of that. And that's what usually happens. Parents would come in and they would feel, they would see kids in the hall working on their own and together in groups without an adult right on top of them.

**Fred Burton:** [00:15:36] They'd see all this gauging artwork that was expressed. So, they were expressing their learning not only mathematically and through words, but through the arts as well, a movement, that sort of thing. And I think that was a big part of how my conversations with parents. I don't know if they always appreciate it if I said, it's for your kid, but I don't know if it's for you or not, but I just try to be as frank and honest with them as possible.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:16:04] And I think that's the best approach. And I certainly remember my experience of interviewing Wickliffe and Wickliffe interviewing me, right? And that is the reality of it. You go there to sort of

find out and it's part of that positive experience tied to that. Really important. And so, Mara, a part of what Fred was talking about is really the essence of making learning visible, correct? So, share with us, what exactly does that mean? What is that all about? Because Fred is correct. You could never—I mean, I'm in and out of Wickliffe for many years, A, when my child was there, but since then, all the different groups from around the world that I have very deliberately taken there to sort of see what was going on.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:16:47] And you can't walk in that building or the old building, I haven't been in the new one yet, and everywhere you go, there are children in the hallways doing things, right? They're not walking from space to space. They are literally camped out on the floor. They're doing. There are pieces. There's work all over the building. It's an incredibly collaborative and iterative place. And the minute you walk through the door, even before you see a child, or an adult, or somebody even stops you, you've gotten four feet down the hall, you know you're in a really unique and special place. So, how does that relate?

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:17:29] I think that question gets at the heart of, well, progressive education and maybe any education, so much of what we need to address or have a discussion about in this work is that first question that I mentioned that Project Zero looks at, which is, what does learning look like? Because, would you say that learning is happening all the time, some of the time, very rare? What would you point to that shows you that learning is taking place?

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:18:04] And that's where the role of this concept from Reggio Emilia, these preschools in Northern Italy around documentation comes to the fore, because I remember at Wickliffe, we would have parent-teacher meetings where we would show examples of children learning and ask parents, where do you see group learning or individual learning even happening? And where would you direct our attention? And you come up with very different kinds of answers and you provoke people's assumptions about what learning looks like.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:18:42] We had worked with some secondary school teachers in Italy as well, and we had asked the teachers to bring in documentation of students thinking. And some of the teachers brought in three 20-second video clips of girls, students giving the right answer. Now, is that where thinking is located? Would you say thinking is located in perhaps making a mistake and learning from feedback in reflection on that learning? And so, a lot of what we do, I think, is both about provoking people's notions about what learning looks like, as well as challenging assumptions about the relationship between the individual and the group, and what's individual, and what's based on social or group learning.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:19:36] Right. And then, how do you take that experience? Because I do think that, that is the conundrum, in many ways, at the heart of giving more communities, more educators, more schools to sort of think about the future of teaching and learning very differently. And then, if you throw in the concept of the future of work into that, and what do we need as fully formed adult citizens in a world that is shifting so incredibly rapidly? Right? What we used to do in education is not going to prepare us adequately for the world we're living in now, right?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:20:20] And so, when you think about that, and Fred, I guess I'm specifically sort of thinking about that in your role now in working with a variety of different post-secondary institutions and working with training or even the work that you're doing with Martha Holden Jennings right now is really sort of in that space of helping professionals reframe the way, A, they do what they do, but more importantly, they see the value of sort of where they're going, right?

**Fred Burton:** [00:20:51] Yeah.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:20:51] And so, my question here is really two pieces. So, one of them is, what does that driving sort of context, as it relates to helping the next generation of professionals in the sort of teaching and learning space, look like? And more importantly, how do you help—I think folks naturally believe that anything's possible in elementary school, but that is not the case when we move into high middle school, high school, and even into post-secondary. And I would argue it's actually the opposite that's true, but it's a tough, tough conversation to have.

**Fred Burton:** [00:21:24] Yeah. Well, certainly, at the university and the various groups that I've been working with post-secondary, I have a number of a lot of students who are looking for just, what do you want? What's the right answer? Just tell me what to do and I'll check this off. And so, I have to disturb them a little bit and disrupt that whole thing by basically putting at the center, —in some ways, adults that kids learn—how I mentioned earlier how adults learn, I think there's a lot of similarities.

**Fred Burton:** [00:22:08] And at the center is creating—I used to have a card that I kept with me when I was principal at Wickliffe, and it said, passion, joy, and imagination. And I said to myself, I'm the only one that knows about this, but now, everybody, your listeners know about this. The secret is out. But I just had it in any time that I figured that I couldn't have passion, joy, and imagination in my work life, then I need to find something else because I don't want to do 20, 25 more years of passionless, joyless existence.

**Fred Burton:** [00:22:40] And so, at the university, because interest drives achievement, I try to create an environment for them in the same way that I work with—the way we worked with kids at Wickliffe. And that had them making choices, and then kind of planning out the consequences of good, bad and ugly with those choices. And it's kind of a standards generation. The group that's coming to the university now, they're the ones who have been standardized and standardized-tested for all their lives.

**Fred Burton:** [00:23:16] And so, I'm kind of going against the grain again and against the culture to try to shake them out of it. And the good news is that I find that they are, even though it creates some anxiety for them to be in project-based kinds of learning or the kinds of things you might be doing at PAST, that they get through it and they feel happier, and they feel success, and they feel a little bit of confidence.

**Fred Burton:** [00:23:42] And then, you get that kind of momentum going, and then connect it to, hey, guess what, this is how your children in your classrooms will need to experience learning and not just kind of memorizing things, but actually learning in a way that creates something larger than just yourself and that's what schools for democracy are, is to communicate those kind of values, attitudes, and behaviors. But it's a rough road sometimes.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:24:15] It is, but I think it's a very valuable road worth running down. And we have visitors who come from all over the world to see the Innovation Lab. It's a very unique place that was built from a variety of different lenses. And our intent was to be a demonstration, but also, to be a place where we could just unfetter, be really, really creative in that educational space, especially as it related to some industry pieces. And we definitely believe here that every kid that walks in the door is infinitely capable of solving the world's greatest problems.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:24:49] And because we start with that premise, it means that you sort of think about the global experience, I think, a little bit differently. And the only reason I'm sharing this piece out is because I think it really touches on, A, what you said and my next question as well, but we had a group of kiddos that are working on one of the design labs. And part of the thing that we've had happening with our instructors. And I had a group, a touring, and I believe they were from Alaska, a whole bunch of school districts that came all the

way from outside of Anchorage to come and sort of see, what would it look like if you immerse kids in a very STEM problem or project-based environment?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:25:28] And what does it look like? How do you facilitate that kind of thing? And the building, you guys can see pieces of it, it's a lot of glass, because we really want to be able to observe and see, and we want learners to learn from each other, and we want learners to learn from across the way from each other, just all of those types of pieces. And the instructor walked into one of those labs. You can't see from afar what they're saying, but you can see all the kids.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:25:51] They're really, really intrigued. There's something that's about to happen. You can sort of witness it from afar, right? And I think that's part of the value in sort of seeing when learning is actually happening or visible in that case. And the instructor then dumps out on the table this box of stuff, parts, and then more conversation happens, the instructor actually leaves the lab. For a couple of hours, leaves the lab, doesn't go back in there, comes in, and sits down at the table with me and this group of folks from afar and the conversation is going on.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:26:27] And at one point, I have an administrator sort of interrupt. The conversation goes, I just need to stop. I have no idea what's going on over there, but I have never, ever in my entire career seen a space or an opportunity, where obviously, instructions were provided, the tools necessary to do, and that teacher can walk away, and the learning that's happening right now is far more robust than anything I've ever seen a teacher deliver in that moment. And in my mind, that's that sort of joyous opportunity to say, that's because these are empowered learners, right? And that empowering of those learners can, in fact, be a game changer. But it was also an empowered teacher, back to your point, Fred, who has a complete confidence in what could go on in that space.

**Fred Burton:** [00:27:21] Well, yeah. And I remember, as a teacher, elementary school teacher myself, I can recall my best moments were sometimes when I would stand up, and look around my class, and see that no one was needing me, that they were just engaged or a visitor would walk into a classroom at Wickliffe, and go, where's the teacher? Oh, they're over there kind of as a learner themselves. And so, I absolutely agree. I think that's well put.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:27:49] Yeah. And I think that gets to the sort of essence of the work or the effort. So, Mara, I'm a teacher, I'm an administrator, take your pick, it does not make a difference, but I have this opportunity sort of blank slate to start school from scratch, what what are the two or three most important things that you would tell folks as they're getting ready to embark on an endeavor that's going to be very, very different based on the work that you've been doing? What's the foundational components to run down that road? And I'm asking very deliberately because I believe we are about to see on the horizon some pretty radical shifting that's going to happen in the educational landscape. And I think that although COVID and the pandemic have been unfortunate in so many different ways, it's also a free pass for innovation.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:28:41] Well, I have to say, much of my thinking has been influenced by this collaboration that my colleagues and I at Project Zero had with educators from Reggio Emilia. And one of the most profound things that I heard a kindergarten teacher say, which I think could be at the foundation of any new school, is she used to, at her parent-child-teacher conferences say to the parents or the caregivers, your child's education is not an individual pursuit. And I think that's very powerful.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:29:16] I think that we really need to, again, shake up what's individual and what's group, and do we need to start with the individual, and then ultimately go out to the group or could you start with both? And in Reggio Emilia, before they even begin doing something with the child, they say, what can we

do to communicate what you're learning with your friends or share what you're learning with your friends? They're asking kids to take the perspective of the other, and that's going to support their own individual learning.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:29:47] And so, this notion that learning, yes, it's absolutely for yourself, but it's also toward creating a shared, more public common body of knowledge that will help to make the world better. I think if we could shift that schema, that would be really powerful. And I think the other thing, and this relates to what you and Fred were talking about earlier, is, again, something that I learned from my experience with Reggio Emilia, which is Loris Malaguzzi used to say that the goal of teaching is not to produce learning, it's to produce the conditions for learning.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:30:24] And I think the one qualification I would make on what you were saying is, that means teachers have to really think about how are they going to set up the environment, the context, the materials, so that children can learn from and with each other. And then, I would say, this role of close observation and documenting what's going on in order to make the learning visible, but not just for the sake of making learning visible, for the sake of deepening the children's learning and thinking about, so where do we go next? So, it's a different role for the teacher. And I think if those two things happened, we'd be in pretty good shape.

**Fred Burton:** [00:31:04] I like what you said, Mara, about the observing, slow observation, the sort of teacher as kid watcher is something that yet a good man, a literacy professor said eons ago, Pat Carini said that speed is the enemy of quality. And Pat Carini is a progressive educator. And I think we need, like Italy has the slow food movement, I think we need the slow education movement. Maybe that would be helpful. But I think to put any of these things into practice, and this is the thing that's always fascinated me the most, and it's the reason that I was at Wickliffe is again, how do we actually live this in practical ways in a community where you're bumping elbows with people with lots of different perspectives?

**Fred Burton:** [00:31:52] And so, for any leaders, I'm working with K through 12 teachers, but I'm also working with administrators, and you have to have some processes available. It just doesn't happen magically. You have, for example—I'll give you an example. We had something at Wickliffe we call the one before two rule, and that is everybody gets a chance to speak once before anybody speaks twice. So, you just make that space. You don't have to do that. And I actually got that, it's interesting, in Washington DC, when I was at the Supreme Court, there was an exhibit there.

**Fred Burton:** [00:32:27] And this was years and years ago. This is a couple decades ago where the exhibit was, how they make decisions. And they were saying things like, yeah, we interrupt each other a lot, and sometimes, we talk over each other, so we had to impose this rule on ourselves, one before two. So, these kinds of processes are really important. So, leaders, and then the whole community of learners, teachers, kids need to take ownership and be able to say, maybe we need to make space for other people or to model that in some way.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:33:02] Yeah, absolutely. And we hear the same sort of ideas and the same types of concerns from communities all the time as they're trying to sort of figure out what it could or what it should look like. And so, I want to thank both of you very much for taking time today to chat with us, and share sort of your journey, and the insights, and the lessons that you've learned along the way, and certainly, for the work that you're doing.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:33:36] Again, I can very much personalize that and say that my own child's experience through progressive education has been incredibly meaningful. And quite frankly, his experience has

influenced a lot of the work that we do here at PAST and in the Innovation Lab, that it's woven through. We may not necessarily call out, for example, Wickliffe or progressive education all the time, but the reality of it is you can see the impact of that here almost every single day. So, thank you both for joining us. Appreciate it.

**Fred Burton:** [00:34:08] Thank you. This was fun.

**Mara Krechevsky:** [00:34:08] This is lovely.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:34:12] 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 reimagine education.