



Tim Mitchell

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Annalies Corbin: [00:00:11] 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: [00:00:46] So, welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. Today, we're going to talk about the intersection of fine arts, and math, and science. And I am super excited, actually, to be able to have this conversation. We're going to be talking with Dr. Tim Mitchell, who oversees, runs, manages, is probably chief cook, and bottle washer, I suspect, at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, which is a seven-12 public magnet specialty school in Alabama. And welcome, Tim.

Tim Mitchell: [00:01:18] Thank you. It's my pleasure to be here.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:20] So, I want to sort of start with recognizing that we have a pretty international audience of listeners. And so, let's start with the big, giant, overarching context, first and foremost. So, what exactly is the Alabama School of Fine Arts? Where is it and sort of why does it exist?

Tim Mitchell: [00:01:40] Exactly. So, within our system, we have a public school district. And within a district, you might have some different schools that are all managed by the State Board of Education. About 53 years ago, a group of people realized that they wanted to form a specialty school that would focus specifically on fine arts training. And so, they went to the state legislature and they asked to create a special school for that purpose. And the Alabama School of Fine Arts was born.

Tim Mitchell: [00:02:13] And basically, it is a state agency. We're independent of the school districts, even though we're a public school. And we can serve all the students from across our state who want to study dance, theater, music, creative arts, and visual arts. And then, not long after that, it was such a successful model of bringing together students who wanted to focus on their passions and wanted to focus on their strengths.

Tim Mitchell: [00:02:44] We had a local entrepreneur/businessman, who said, you should have a school for math and science that is like what they are doing at the fine arts school. And at the time, we said, absolutely, we think this is a synergy that can happen. And so, unusual for an art school in the country, we began a school

of math and science. And right today, about a third of our students are in our math and science specialty, which has become our sixth specialty along with those other five.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:15] Wow. That is absolutely remarkable because these conversations come up in other places, obviously, but I think this is the first one I've ever seen, where they said, hey, we can do that, we'll roll it in, it'll be part of us, not something completely separate. That's absolutely amazing.

Tim Mitchell: [00:03:34] No. In time, there have been a couple of other schools like us that are focused on math and science specifically, but the idea that we would try to understand and maybe even invent what that synergy would look like. So, for example, when you come to us as a math and science student, you go through an audition process rather than an application process. And then, you are working in your specialty. Here's how the Alabama School of Fine Arts sets up your day.

Tim Mitchell: [00:04:04] In the morning, you're doing your advanced high school degree in Alabama and you have a couple of hours where you're taking your history class, your English class, your social studies class, modern language, all of those things. And then, have a nice lunch. And then, in the afternoon, for three to four hours, you focus on your specialty. And with six years to focus on your specialty at three to four hours a day, you become incredibly prepared, and incredibly advanced, and you really get into sort of the creative, collaborative side of each of those disciplines.

Tim Mitchell: [00:04:43] And so, you're really doing work in the high school by the time you hit nine through 12, that is already at the college level, even in ninth grade, in many ways. And our math and science students benefit from that because that focused education that we had developed for being able to dance in a significant amount of time instead of an after-school program, being able to play music for a significant amount of time rather than just as an extracurricular or in a band.

Tim Mitchell: [00:05:15] So, we really made it our curriculum. The specialties really are our curriculum. And so, we have almost a pre-professional approach to it all. So, how that have worked with math and science, at first, math and science, they were very different from the arts and it was just about the schedule. But as time has gone by, we've found those synergies. So, the same effort that is going into a visual arts portfolio, a body of work is being developed by math and science students in the sense that they end with a culminating research project that they do with a local university.

Tim Mitchell: [00:05:15] And it's been enormously successful for the math and science students to think of the competitions that they go out to, like the science bowl as performances, and think of the role of coaching and rehearsal in their lab work. So, it's quite interesting. And right now, I'm happy to say, like the math and science, this is the third year in a row that they have won the honor of representing Alabama. They won the state bowl in the National Math and Science Bowl.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:25] That's wonderful. That's fabulous.

Tim Mitchell: [00:06:28] And we just had a few who won a NASA hackathon for COVID-19 solution. So, just as proud as we are, our art students have unbelievable success stories of their own. We're working right now with Carlos Izcaray, who is a conductor of the Alabama Symphony on an all-new original composition that's taking place as a virtual ensemble. And so, we kind of approach all those things the same way. And I tried to explain it when I first was coming to what we call ASFA, Alabama School of Fine Arts, ASFA, but I tried to explain it as, it's like the K-12 version of Carnegie Mellon. Like they're known for STEM, right?

Tim Mitchell: [00:07:16] But they also have a pretty rocking humanities department. And it's the intermingling of ideas and the cross-development of networks of people that have led to really new whole fields of study, the crossover between humanities, and math and science at Carnegie Mellon. And I see the same thing happening here. Because in the morning, all those students from the different disciplines mixed with each other, they're all very high potential students in their own area, very dedicated and advanced, what they can do is see what each other, what they're working on, how they're working on it, how they think. So, in visual arts, when you get a studio habit of mind, how do you explain that to your math and science friend?

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:59] Right. And so, one of the things that's fascinating to me about this, and I truly, truly love this, because I engage with lots and lots of different folks about conversations very much like this, and oftentimes, as I'm sure you are very well-aware, you find these folks, and especially when you start talking about math and science or STEM education generally, what happens, as I'm sure you've experienced, is there are these two camps that seem to set themselves up, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:26] I'm the STEM camp or I'm the STEAM camp. And it's an intriguing thing. And over many, many years now, lots of our listeners have heard me say this, I collect the acronyms, right? Because I'm an anthropologist by training. And so, I have found that the human need to find themselves in that moment to be really, really intriguing. And for better or worse, when we put so much emphasis in this country, and certainly, funding in the United States around STEM education, that was really sort of the thing that changes that dynamic.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:57] It's not that we weren't doing a lot of those things before, but we put a label on it, and we stuck some federal funds, and we said, hey, to get access to this, you need to be this thing. And immediately, the backlash to that is, oh, my goodness, we're now leaving out the arts. We're leaving out, take your pick, all these different things, when the reality is that was never the intention. It was a way to show that these things are foundational. They could work differently.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:21] They could propel and accelerate each other because of the natural intersections that are across all of those sorts of things. And so, I love the fact, first and foremost, that that's not the way you or the school have approached this at all, but literally have been able to say, no, these things can and should all be together. We're going to roll them together. We're going to use the same success metrics and opportunities across the populations to elevate and accelerate the students involved. So, bravo because that's awesome.

Tim Mitchell: [00:09:55] Well, thanks very much. I have to say that I think in this STEAM versus STEM, I see the STEAM as a very interesting conversation that's happening within a whole school curriculum where your students are studying every topic and you want to understand like how these things are going to integrate. I think coming from the point of view that we had with fine arts, that dance really needed their time to develop their discipline fully. Music needs their time.

Tim Mitchell: [00:10:29] They need to literally practice their instrument, and then also practice being in an ensemble, and then also learn the upper reaches of sound engineering, and of composition, and arrangement, and all of those things. And so, you could come up with a system in which you're saying, oh, I'm going to create a class that it's about the math of music, or it's about the visual arts of design, but our approach is more to understand that those disciplines do need their time and they do have their traditions.

Tim Mitchell: [00:11:01] But what we want to do is look at the habits of mind that our students can exchange. And so, we figure, everything that we've learned about creativity on the fine art side, from our creative writing classes and their writers' workshops, that from the critique in visual arts, from the rehearsal in theater arts, all

of those things can translate into math and science. And math and science then looks at innovation and creativity in a very forward-thinking way.

Tim Mitchell: [00:11:34] Meanwhile, all the things that you look at in math and science, the scientific method and how you research something in depth, and how you work in a team, and how you may have something that is an experiment that does not work, all of their thinking can apply to these other areas. Imagine thinking of your creative writing draft as a lab experiment. Imagine thinking of your music composition as a body of work rather than just one piece. So, it's not that we are creating a hybrid classroom.

Tim Mitchell: [00:12:13] And I think we're spiritually aligned with STEAM, but we're practicing STEM, and we're practicing fine arts, and we're allowing the authentic connections and networking to be made. And that includes with the faculty, because our faculty here on the fine arts side are all working artists and our faculty on the math and science side are working researchers. And so, the faculty, too, are coming to each other, and saying, have you thought about this, the way I think about it in my field? And I think that makes a huge difference.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:52] I think that it does. And I think that's wonderfully well-put. And I truly, truly appreciate the sort of thinking about that sort of philosophical point of view. And so, that's really intriguing. So, I want to dig in a little bit sort of the school, from the student experience side just a little bit. And so, I'm really curious, and I have no doubt, actually, that some of our listeners are thinking the same thing. So, the students that come in and they get the opportunity to come in as seventh graders.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:19] So, to your point, they get six years potential opportunity to really craft, and find, and hone their skills in whichever sort of pathway or component that they're in. But do the students have the flexibility or even the desire—let's say I enter and dance, but suddenly, I'm uninspired and I want to shift over to the science side or the math side, do the students have the ability to move within the programming or is it, I'm in this pathway and this is the pathway that you're in? How does that work from the student experience side?

Tim Mitchell: [00:13:54] So, this is one reason why we have seventh and eighth grade, instead of just nine-

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:57] Exactly. For all of us, right?

Tim Mitchell: [00:14:01] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:01] Figure it out before high school.

Tim Mitchell: [00:14:04] Right. Exactly. If we had just nine through 12, I think it would look different. I think it would look different. And we do accept some ninth graders, of course, because we're still open to that. Some people want to join in high school. But then, they are typically in for the long game, and I think seventh and eighth graders are, sometimes, they look around and they see other things. Of course, we have had some change.

Tim Mitchell: [00:14:26] I'd say one of the great stories is about a family that will send a couple of students, and then the third sibling—two will go into math and science, and they think, oh, the third one is going to also join us in math and science because that's the family we are, and then that person chooses visual art or chooses theater. So, that's one way it happens. Another way is that a student just changes their mind.

Tim Mitchell: [00:14:51] And so, yes, they can apply internally, much more easily than externally. We already know their profile. We know their interests. We can talk with them about fit. So, I've heard of creative writing, students who move into theater. I've heard of a few examples. Well, I think probably, the most natural connection really is music, and math and science. Those two do have crossover more than the other areas, but it's not impossible to change.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:21] Right. And the school is located in Birmingham, correct?

Tim Mitchell: [00:15:25] Right.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:26] And you also have a partially residential program. So, that leads me to assume, and please correct me if I'm wrong, so students are coming from all over the State of Alabama to attend the school?

Tim Mitchell: [00:15:37] Yes, they are. So, we have the dorms specifically for that reason, about 18% of our students live in the dorm. And that's really so that we can serve the whole state rather than just the Birmingham area. Also, within the Birmingham area, our families travel longer to get to the school, to commute to the school, even as day students, because they're often coming from further out than a typical school district. This is not a local school. So, we are technically a state agency, which is so interesting, right? And an independent district, like I mentioned before.

Tim Mitchell: [00:16:16] But our mission is to try and reach, if we can, all of the state. I think over time, what we're doing now is transitioning from a time in which students from all over the state would come and apply to ASFA based on its reputation to the school beginning to reach out across the state and try to help students develop that skill set that they need early, right? So, it's very hard to show up and maybe not have already studied in your area of strength. So, we want to be talking to literally kids in fourth, and fifth, and sixth grade before they might apply in seventh and eighth. And we do have some that apply in seventh and eighth.

Tim Mitchell: [00:17:01] And we say, look, you're not ready, here's this summer program you can take. Here are the things you can do on the side. Here's the type of testing you should try. Here's the practice you should do so that they can come back again another year, and apply again, and then they often make the program. In fact, those are often the best-prepared students. But having the state mission, yes, it is a selective program, where more people audition than we have spots usually, but we go through an extraordinary effort to try and reach beyond the region and to sort of beyond just reaching out to the other counties, but really just helping with that process of being able to come here.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:49] And what does that look like over time? And scale is always one of those things. Obviously, it happens in every state. Lots of communities, really successful programs. There's a very valid reason and rationale for wanting to take the best programs. At the end of the day, we are all collectively about ensuring the best success opportunities for students. And also, for our listeners, students don't pay tuition. It's a public school. So, they get to go there. That's a really important thing.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:20] I want to make sure that we're really upfront about that. This is not a school that is restricted just to those who are wealthy enough to be able to afford the opportunity. It's broadly open. But how do you? Because I would assume that for a program that is successful as yours is, there is a lot of requests, asks, needs, wants, or aspiration to say, how can we, in fact, see the same success in other places? So, what is the opportunity for scale or the opportunity? You were touching on helping kids be prepared, but what is that pushback into more traditional school or into other communities?

Tim Mitchell: [00:19:00] That question has some complicated answers, so I'm going to try to break it down.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:08] Absolutely.

Tim Mitchell: [00:19:09] Alright. I mean, the first thing to realize is that by being open to the state population, we have a greater amount of diversity, but it also means that we have a lot more work to do on inclusion, and equity, and bringing together all of these different identities, all of these different regions of the state, all of these different families, and just having them encounter each other. And to me, that's a little bit like going off to college, even though we're days old.

Tim Mitchell: [00:19:40] We got the dorm, but it's a little bit like that because you are encountering people. And so, that's one big thing. The second thing I would say is that I think when people look at going to a school like ASFA, of course, they want to come to the Alabama School of Fine Arts because our kids have done well in getting into college. I mean, we have an 85% to 90% Merit Scholarship success rate. A typical school has 15%.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:10] Right. Pretty remarkable balance there, right?

Tim Mitchell: [00:20:14] Yes. So, that was about 8.8 million last year and typically can run up to 10 million a year that is awarded to our students. And that just shows the success that they have in being prepared for college and university. And not only do they go to colleges and universities, they go to some of the top conservatories. They go to some of the top visual art colleges in the country. So, that success and that rigor is sort of a draw, but I also think that it comes down to students who feel like they find their people, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:48] Right.

Tim Mitchell: [00:20:49] We have heard this many times. It's because if you are totally interested in your area, not all the other students around you support that. And you may be the very top person, too, in your field, in your school, but imagine you do know how to sight-read music, but you come to ASFA and everybody knows how to sight-read music. You do love math and science, but everybody's got that game, right? And so, we think of it as an accelerant. Just maybe, it's the true meaning of magnet, but we're bringing together high-potential students.

Tim Mitchell: [00:21:26] But being with your peers, it's like going up to the major leagues. Suddenly, everyone around you can play at your level, and you have to step up, and push yourself, and meet that challenge. And it's the peers, right? It's the peers who come up with ideas that you haven't come up with yet, who are just as interested, they're so strong in their field. And honestly, you come in, in seventh or eighth grade, and you look ahead, and you're like, wow, how do I become that 12th grader?

Tim Mitchell: [00:22:00] But there's a process here where I think people are uplifted in their interest. And it's not just that we do have a renowned faculty, actually, highly awarded faculty. In fact, just yesterday, I got the news that our Director of Student Support, who was also an alumni, who is also the Chair of the Music Department for 14 years, she has the number one top holiday hit on all the smooth jazz channels.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:29] Oh. Well, there you go then. Hey.

Tim Mitchell: [00:22:31] Yeah. Her name is Kim Scott. So, I could go through all these points of pride, which I think are really important, but you've got now the possibility of working with a mentor that looked at the world

the way you did and peers that are interested in what you're interested in. And we just hear students, alumni, and sometimes, parents telling the story of a student saying, I found my people. This is my place.

Tim Mitchell: [00:22:58] And in Alabama, when you come to our school, you're giving up that football tradition at the local high school so that you have time in the afternoon for rehearsals, and performances, and exhibits, and studio time, and things like that. This is not the typical high school experience. It really is a concentrated effort. But where you find that uplift is not in some of those traditional things, but in your peers' experience, and in your experience of working with them and the faculty. So, I'm beginning to think of it as an accelerator. I was trying to think, what is it that just—I mean, it goes beyond the curriculum in some way.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:39] Right. And I think that a lot of our early college schools around the country think of themselves in that same vein. They would use that same term that they were accelerators. And so, I do think that that's a term that would resonate with lots of folks. One of the things I always want to be really mindful of in this program is the purpose of it is to highlight really great case studies, those exemplars in transformative education that are out there in the world. There's a lot of the intro on the program when we talk about this notion of school being broken. And I argue, well, it's not really broken, it's just obsolete as designed.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:13] But that's not the case everywhere because we do have these exemplars all over the country and around the world of transformative, very modern, very now, very relevant education that's happening. And the purpose of the program is to say, look, let's take a look at those exemplars and see if we can't figure out collectively how to figure out the best things of those so that as communities are working on rethinking what education, teaching, learning, and future of work might look like, what are some of the things that I could go out that are happening right now, I can pull from and craft what is going to be meaningful for us?

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:47] And so, when we have these conversations, as folks are sitting in a community that doesn't have an Alabama School of Fine Arts, and math and science, but they want to pull elements from what you're doing into their local community, what are the two or three things that you think that your school does that other communities could do without having a specialty school? What do you think is the primary takeaway around thinking about that transformative educational experience for a future individual who ultimately ends up college career workforce?

Tim Mitchell: [00:25:27] Right. Well, if you don't have a school like ASFA available, I hope you have one in which you'll be able to go as far as you could go in your area of strength. And that means that it may be that schools need to be way more flexible about requirements. Absolutely, you're going to get all the core things that you need to get, just like we have our morning of advanced high school degree, but you need the time and you need the support to go beyond that. And I think that the very innovative things, the very different sort of classrooms do look a lot like fine arts classrooms.

Tim Mitchell: [00:26:20] For years, there was a discussion in regular—calling it regular, sorry. In schools, there was a conversation about the difference between a summative assessment and a formative assessment. Well, not to get too geeky about it, but summative is tests, and quizzes, and memorization, and content. Informative is about skills. And fine arts is all about the skills and always has been, long before that movement. Those classrooms were not in a lecture format. Yes, there's memorization in theater, that's not what I'm talking about, but they were highly interactive.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:59] They were applied. They're hands-on applied. You got to have to do it, right?

Tim Mitchell: [00:27:04] But there are also areas where you constantly face a problem that you must solve, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:11] Right.

Tim Mitchell: [00:27:11] You don't come into the classroom with an answer, and your teacher is probably not giving you that answer, they're leading you on the process of making solutions. Now, that's one thing. You asked for three. So, the second thing is, the big thing in math and science, especially in the younger grades, has been to talk about makers. That whole movement was to talk, really, about applied math and science as it relates to creating a pipeline for robotics, for cyber, for that kind of maker, to understand how things work and how you can make things.

Tim Mitchell: [00:27:53] And this is where we get into 3D digital printers, and we get into teams that are trying to learn how to manage a drone, and build a robot, and all of these things. And it starts with the younger kids understanding maybe what's inside of that machine, right? Well, the fine arts were always makers as well, right? What is the difference between a robotics studio and a visual arts studio? You're going to be hard-pressed to explain that to someone from another planet, right? When you say, well, they both have supplies and they both are a mess, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:32] People are everywhere. Their stuff are spread around.

Tim Mitchell: [00:28:36] So, we were already project-based long before. And then, nothing compares, really, with having to share your work with your family and with the public. So, the performative aspect is my third thing, the performative aspect of putting together a visual arts exhibit, having an opening reception of, you didn't just write a short story and your poems, but you are now giving your senior reading and people are coming to the lecture hall to hear you give a poetry reading, or obviously, concerts, and music, productions in theater, productions in dance, maybe seeing the choreography that you as a senior came up with the younger students, where you don't typically have time for that.

Tim Mitchell: [00:29:25] But anyway, all of that is being a maker. And so, this is another area where the synergy, it feels like the creation of the Alabama School of Fine Arts with its math and science wing and specialty was sort of forward-thinking in a way that wasn't even anticipated, right? We're ahead on those things, but what's most valuable about them comes through in what we're now beginning to focus on, calling, future-proof skills. Because you talked about curriculum being out of date or education having been out of date, but these are the skills that are not going to be replaced by AI.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:06] Correct. Yes.

Tim Mitchell: [00:30:08] We could use AI, but these are the ones—and it's so interesting because we have so many students who do go on to ballet companies, or they go on to famous TV shows, or they write amazing novels that are so well-known, I could name some of those, or they're working for NASA on the Mars project. We have a bunch of those. I won't try to run through all of them. But the idea is we also have students who come out of here and they decide to do something else. But what they never lose is all of those habits of mind that they've developed as a maker in a creative field that is assessed with an audience.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:46] Yeah, absolutely. And I could not have said that better. So, so completely aligned with the philosophy that we have at PAST. So, I want to thank you so very much, Dr. Mitchell, for spending time with us today for talking about the synergies that happen inside your school and with all of those students. And I am so hopeful that our listeners were as enraptured as I was. So, I want to visit. I want to see it. I've seen so many of these different programs around the world and there are some true, true standouts. And I love the

way the Alabama School of Fine Arts thinks about itself and its role in the world. So, bravo for that. And thank you so much for joining us today.

Tim Mitchell: [00:31:36] Well, thank you very much. I really appreciate the time.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:40] 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.