



125. Using The Conrad Challenge to Unlock the Box with Nancy Conrad & Ankesh Madan

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Annalies Corbin: [00:00:18] 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: [00:00:52] So, welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I am super excited about the conversation that we are about to have. And today, in particular, I'm super excited, because we are going to be talking about the Conrad Challenge. And I have been familiar with the Conrad Challenge for a number of years, advocate for it frequently, sent the notifications out all the time to schools and colleagues around the world, because it's so phenomenal and I've been a judge for a number of years. And so, I feel a little bit like a fan girl, because today, we are going to be interviewing Nancy Conrad. And joining her is Ankesh Madan, who was a participant. And so, over the years, what the Conrad Challenge has done is just remarkable. And so, welcome to Nancy and Ankesh.

Nancy Conrad: [00:01:44] Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:45] So, a little bit of context for those of you that aren't familiar with Nancy and Nancy's journey, Nancy is a former teacher, and has been, for many, many years now, a very well globally recognized leader in transformative education, one of the top 100 leaders in STEM, featured speakers, so on and so forth. She is also the wife of Pete Conrad, who, during the Apollo 12 mission, became the third man to walk on the Moon. And in honor of her husband and Pete's work, Nancy founded and is also the chairman of the Conrad Foundation and the Conrad Challenge. And so, Nancy, as we get started in this conversation, would you share with our listeners just a little bit about sort of what the challenge and the foundation's work in that space really means to you?

Nancy Conrad: [00:02:38] Sure. What it means to me?

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:40] Yes.

Nancy Conrad: [00:02:43] Everything. And why? Because this is the opportunity to flip the lens on education. I have been really, all my life, working in bringing students away from them to participate in their own learning. I'm

not going to admire the problem of the complacent classroom, with the students sitting there sucking up learning to take a test that proves if they know something. That's the past. I've been working really forever on inviting students to participate in their own learning, and that's what the Conrad Challenge does.

Nancy Conrad: [00:03:18] I love the title of your podcast, Learning Unboxed, because unboxed thinking is at the core of what we do. So, we've been taught forever that there are two ways of thinking of things, in the box and out of the box, but we don't have a box. So, we actually created a no box toolbox so that there's a framework for young people to understand how to combine design thinking and systems thinking. And we invite our students to really design the future by creating products to solve big global and local challenges.

Nancy Conrad: [00:03:55] They do it in categories, aerospace, energy, cyber, health, basically. So, these kids are creating products. They work in teams, two to five in a team. They're 13 to 18 years old. I was a high school teacher. My husband got his moonshot when he was in high school, so that made perfect sense. So, that's what we do. And it's really very, I call it pull education. Pull is a superpower. So, pulls creative learning. It pulls students into their own education, really, and pulls them into participating in what the future looks like. So, that's at the core of what we do.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:40] And I love every aspect of that, and I think that that's one of the reasons why the Challenge has had such great appeal to me over the years. And certainly, at PAST Foundation, we believe in all of the things that you were just talking about, that we want to empower people to be fully immersed, lifelong learners, and quite frankly, to solve big giant global wicked problems. And we also, I think, very much in the same vein as you, believe that kids are quite frankly capable of solving a lot of our global problems.

Nancy Conrad: [00:05:11] Adorably capable. They are super smart. And just opening up that, I wouldn't know what to call it, just opening the door to their own creativity and their own capabilities is mind-boggling.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:28] It is mind-boggling and it's absolutely awesome to behold. And actually, that sort of gets us to Ankesh, who was a participant in the global Challenge in 2010. And just for a little bit of context for our listeners, so we're going to have him talk about that experience, but just sort of put it into sort of space and time, since then, Ankesh is a tech investor and entrepreneur. I love that you call yourself a recovering materials engineer. I think that's kind of near and dear to my heart as well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:01] And you have been involved in investing, in designing, in thinking of so many amazing innovations. The list on your bio is as long as you are, you are tall, I suspect if you really started to pull it apart, and all the ins and outs of it. So, share with us just a little bit, because you've been on this journey for a while and you've known Nancy in a variety of different sort of aspects and endeavors, I suspect, if we are to really sort of dig into all of that. And so, talk to us a little bit about the long-term impact of having been a participant in the Challenge on your journey, because it's quite remarkable.

Ankesh Madan: [00:06:38] I appreciate the kind words, Annalies. And really, I think that what it comes down to is that, at least for me, I've always thought about the Conrad Challenge in my experience with the Challenge back in 2010, as you can tell, I'm no longer 13 to 18 years old.

Nancy Conrad: [00:06:52] Exactly.

Ankesh Madan: [00:06:53] And for me, it really was kind of this like starting block. It was the starting block from which I really launched my entrepreneurial career, this journey into investing. I think this no box toolbox that Nancy alluded to, I think, especially kind of within the bounds of traditional education, there's a lot of really

innovative things that are happening, but often, I think the tools that you collect are ones that they help you solve problems that are within the workplace, maybe kind of like they're less specific tools, right?

Ankesh Madan: [00:07:25] And as our societal problems get more and more complex, more and more specific, we increasingly need kind of more specific tools to be able to solve them, right? So, rather than taking a hammer to every nail, ideally, we have scalpels, we have more specific tools that can help us address these challenges. So, for me, the Conrad Challenge was kind of this starting block from where I learned to very quickly assess problems and understand, okay, how do I learn to address this?

Ankesh Madan: [00:07:53] What are the different lenses I can look at this problem, and say, okay, is there a solution? What are the different ways I can address this, whether it's through a product, or a policy solution, or something like that? It's really about being able to look at problems and quickly assess how to develop a solution for it. So, that's what I think the Conrad Challenge kind of helped start me on the journey of. And so far, it's going pretty well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:18] I would agree. It's going pretty well, like I said, by taking a look. One of the things that having been a judge for the Conrad Challenge for a number of years that I have always been impressed, and I've been so impressed by many, many of the different sorts of aspects or elements of the Challenge, that every time I finish a judging session, and it's, for me, I will admit that I'm the judge that wasted the very last minute.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:41] I've got it weeks in advance, and then all of a sudden, I've got the stuff in a deadline to get all turned in and you're pounding down to that last minute. But the flip side of that is I find it highly energizing, right? Because I spend probably a day or two just completely immersed in the amazing ideas that these young people have, and often will go back to my staff and tell them about the things that these kids were coming up with.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:09] And it's a wide variety of things. And those problem solving in deep, deep thinking skills, I think, are some of the things that appeal the most to me. The other thing that although I've never seen articulated as part of the program elements, but I've seen it over and over again and saw it clearly, it's just a natural piece of the program's evolution is the cultural component.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:33] And what I mean by that is the participants have not just a deep understanding of the need in their own community, but a deep understanding of how their solution could help others that they have such limited understanding of, and yet it's intuitive to them. And so, I'm really curious, Nancy, as the Conrad Challenge has been going on for a number of years, I suspect you've seen a number of trends over those years, not so much in the themes, but sort of in the way the students approach problem solving. And I'm super, super curious about what some of those sorts of things that you see are the surprises along the way.

Nancy Conrad: [00:10:09] Every portfolio is a surprise. I mean, when you open that opportunity, and there's no box, and it's not, make this, and if you make it better, you wind, it's find a solution. And a lot of these students are not always solving challenges, they're doing social good, social impact. They're very engaged. I have a theory, I wish I could study it, and maybe that's an opportunity for someone. We work with Gen Z, 13 to 18. Gen Z is the digital native generation. These kids grew up on the internet. We've been on the internet since we were born 16 years ago.

Nancy Conrad: [00:10:09] These kids see the world in the same way Pete saw when he stood on the Moon and looked back at Earth, no borders, no boundaries, right? The kids see it the same way. They will work together across countries, socioeconomic levels, genders. They don't care where you are. And many times,

kids will form teams across countries, across genders, across socioeconomic levels. So, what comes out of all of that is just so many multiple different approaches to solutions, and the opportunity for the kids is really not just to design something. So, design thinking is part of it, but you got to deploy it, so it's commercially viable solution.

Nancy Conrad: [00:11:39] So, the design thinking needs systems thinking, it's practically a special son. I wish I could tell you I see a trend. What I see is more, and more, and more students coming into this platform, because it is like, it's no box. And let's face it, the classroom is pretty much a box, which there are good things in that box, but being able to not only design, and create, and work in a team. So, the team has leadership, collaboration, communication, cooperation, right?

Nancy Conrad: [00:12:18] You're learning all that, too. You're learning how to pitch. You're finding your own authenticity, and you may get a patent in your work. So, I will share with you an interesting story. This past year, we had eight winning teams. We work with Denton's, which is the largest law firm in the world, and I was on a call with all of the teams, the endgame was going to be which team got the patent award. And I hate to call it, this lawyer from Denton said, ah, I don't know what to do. I said, what's wrong? He said, they're all so great, we're going to patent all of them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:59] Oh, that's spectacular.

Nancy Conrad: [00:12:59] Oh, it's like, wow. And the kids own that. Now, we don't want them dropping out of school, and making companies, raising money, and building websites. That's not the point of this. The point of this is really to open up your own superpower. Can you understand how to think and how to learn so that you can go on and you become someone like Ankesh who is creative and entrepreneurial, and can design the future actively? Well, I wish I could tell you I saw a trend. I will say space is getting a lot more interesting these days. That's for sure. And it's our legacy, so we've always had a lot of students. I don't know. Ankesh, do you see a trend?

Ankesh Madan: [00:13:50] Yeah. I mean, the way, I don't see necessarily, there are some trends on the sector side, of course, but I think that the trends that I see are kind of a general push towards self-directed learning, right? This is more of a cultural trend, where the students that come in, I mean, I think in some ways, COVID-19 also accelerated everyone's ability to go digital, right? We had a team last year, where it was a five-person team and all of them were from different countries. They met on different online forums and they formed a team across Singapore, the US, the UK.

Ankesh Madan: [00:14:24] So, this is time zones and cultures. This is a cross-cultural, cross-time zone, cross-world team that managed to produce some really, really incredible business plans. So, it's partially about this, I think that the fact that what Nancy was saying about the Gen Z kind of landscape means that they're digitally native. They can very easily kind of connect with others and learn from each other, but it's because they're very self-directed. It's because they can say, okay, we want to solve this problem, and because of that, we need to learn to go do CAD software at home. We need to learn to do some 3D printing. We need to learn to go build an app.

Ankesh Madan: [00:15:04] But they build the skills based on the problems they want to solve. And what's enabling that is the fact that, like Nancy was alluding to, it's this platform where you are forced to, in a way, it's a no constraint area, where now, you get to choose what you need to learn or what you want to learn. And it's not that everyone's going to learn to pitch, for example, to judges, it's maybe you have a couple of people who are going to be the experts on pitching, a couple of people that are the technical experts on the team.

Ankesh Madan: [00:15:32] I think once you give these teams the ability to just define their own roles, learn the skills that they need to learn, it kind of falls into place. So, I think that that's been the biggest trend, is over time, more and more self-directed learning means that you learn more specialized skills at an earlier age. And I think that's being reflected in the quality of the projects and also the specificity of the projects that we see. Because of the wildfires in California and really all around the world that have been raging, we saw a project where a team was using sound waves to extinguish wildfires, and that's because of a current cultural problem.

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

Nancy Conrad: [00:16:11] A big wow.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:12] That's a big wow, yeah.

Ankesh Madan: [00:16:13] Exactly. I mean, it's-go ahead.

Nancy Conrad: [00:16:17] It's the self-directed learning that you just focused on, there's a couple of pieces I want to share just out of what Ankesh just said. One is, as these kids begin to work across country, cities, states, et cetera, you have now a platform where education could start to become diplomacy. So, isn't that interesting? Peace would break out, wouldn't that be wonderful? That's part of what's so fascinating to me, and the other part is this self-directed learning that you talked about, Ankesh.

Nancy Conrad: [00:16:53] We don't tell the kids, well, make this, you make it better, you win, and the products across the categories are from A to Z, and you can't even begin to imagine what they're going to be. And the wonderful surprise for all of us, and you get to do this as a judge, is to just see what these kids create, and some of them are insanely amazing, and they don't win, I think they have won, because they've become part of this and they have learned how to be their only best learning system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:27] Yeah, they absolutely do. And I would say that, as a judge, this is one of the things that I am blown away by every single time. And I think that, Ankesh, your observation about, there are many, many downsides, obviously, to the global pandemic, and we're still in the midst of it, and there's, on some levels, no end in sight currently, if we sort of think about what's happening around the world in different rate and pace.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:54] And one of the things that I noticed last year was actually that the kids would talk about, it would come up in their videos, it would come with their business plans or come in my way about how that disruption, on some levels, made it a little bit more difficult for them to do X, Y or Z, whatever it was, tied. But the flip side of it was every single one of the times that that was mentioned, they very, very quickly pivoted to the advantage that it then provided to them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:25] And I would say almost universally, with the set that I was evaluating, that advantage was that they found a new way to work, to work better, faster, harder, more creatively, and that they had a universal feeling of freedom in the work, because some of the traditional boundaries that they may have naturally encountered having participated in a more traditional year were suddenly gone. And I think many of them sort of felt like the world had sort of unfettered for them in a unique kind of way.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:00] And that's not obviously the way the kids expressed it, but it was really the essence that I sort of came to repeatedly in listening to those presentations. But I am really curious, Ankesh, based on your experience, having participated in the Challenge, and then going on to do all the different things

that you're doing these days, and thinking about the fact that you, yourself, are one of those digital natives in terms of sort of encompassing this sort of space in the world.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:28] If you think about sort of the what's next in terms of the world of innovation, because you're seeing stuff as an investor all the time, and if you think about the things that the kids are working on, where do you see sort of the push points? Not the ideas, I'm not asking about the ideas, but I'm asking about the way you think about innovation and what's going to make innovation successful at scale, because that's one of the pieces that I would argue all of these endeavors ultimately struggle to truly, truly be able to identify.

Ankesh Madan: [00:19:56] Yeah. Oh, man, that's a loaded question. But no, it's interesting. Currently, I work in the venture capital industry as an investor, primarily focused on deep technology. That's anything from synthetic biology to digitalization of under-digitalized industries like pathology, for example, warehouse automation to help enable ecommerce of the future. Really, it's focused on breakthrough technologies that can be commercialized to help improve our lives.

Ankesh Madan: [00:20:25] And I've always felt that my unfair advantage in the industry is the fact that since I was a kid, I used to get grounded for reading, I used to read a ton. I think it wasn't just nonfiction, it was actually mostly novels. And even within that, it was science fiction. So, I always felt that my unfair advantage within venture capital was that I read a lot of science fiction and can draw upon the visions of all these authors who kind of think about the world.

Ankesh Madan: [00:20:54] Their entire job is to think about what the world can be, right? I'm in the middle of a series right now that was written in the 1980s, but it's imagining the world what it would look like in 2200s, 2300s. And even today, I think some of the learnings around how commercial space will evolve, for example, in this series are starting to come to bear in the 21st century.

Ankesh Madan: [00:21:14] So, that was always my unfair advantage, was kind of leveraging the insights from science fiction, but I think the other other part of it now, at least for me, is seeing the creativity that the students in the Conrad Challenge are bringing to bear to solve current challenges, right? There's this idea that like let's take the example of COVID-19 last year.

Ankesh Madan: [00:21:35] During the pandemic, I think the students that exhibited the ability to very quickly adapt, I think more and more, students are getting better at quickly adapting to change. And those are also the ones that that ability is what gives you the ability to be a good entrepreneur or intrapreneur in the future, because you can adapt to changes, be very nimble in steering your organization through changes. The startups of today, the ones that have succeeded or survived over the last five to 10 years, it's the ones that say, oh, no, here's a new market condition, let's respond in kind, and let's do it quickly.

Ankesh Madan: [00:22:09] Maybe there are, for example, in the EV, electric vehicles, landscape, the companies that are doing great are the ones that were around for a while, but now, they're capitalizing on the trends and the tailwinds in the industry, the ones that are surviving. It's really just about adaptation, right? Whoever can build the skills and adapt quickly, I think that's what enables long-term survival and also the ability to thrive, whether it's an entrepreneurial or an intrapreneurial setting.

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:38] So, Nancy, sort of following up this idea of the virtual world that we're living in and all of our digital natives, the Challenge itself has had to make pivots. So, not just the participants, right? So, talk to us a little bit about some of the pivots that the Challenge has had to make in our current times.

Nancy Conrad: [00:22:55] Well, when the pandemic hit, we were probably the first of these sorts of activities that started, I think maybe early January, maybe end of December, in the first year of the pandemic, this is going to be a BC and AC, before COVID and after COVID. I hope for the day after COVID. But we had to become our kids. We had to think about, where's the platform that's going to solve, it's going to do all the kinds of things we do at the summit, at least most of them, and not be in postage stamps talking at each other, but could integrate with each other?

Nancy Conrad: [00:23:37] And one of our team found a fabulous platform. In fact, Ankesh was our host this year for our virtual summit and I don't know what this year is going to be. I don't know if we'll be able to do our innovation summit in person, or it may have to be a hybrid, and it's something we're looking at now, but that agile thinking, the ability to look at different things in the systems approach and find the thing that you can pivot to, because you're not stuck in a mindset, right?

Nancy Conrad: [00:24:12] So, we went through it. It was really interesting. And then, we had to train everybody on this site, and I think it was extremely successful this year. The kids, the intersection with the judges has really been interesting. And one of our board members, his name is Simon, we've named him our supreme judge, because he was just here. He does the rubrics and evaluation pieces that you get. We hope you will judge this year again.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:45] Oh, absolutely. I won't miss it.

Nancy Conrad: [00:24:47] Yeah. Well, it's quite something. So, I think the tuning that we do in this team that we work with are young. Ankesh is part of our advisory board. We have members on our board of directors who are past competitors. We have an alumni leadership council that's all over the world and alumni that are all over the world. So, this isn't just a one and done. It's to become part of a whole community of young innovators and entrepreneurs that are all over the world. And it's an embrace. I mean, this is your forever tribe.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:26] Yeah. And it's an experience that sticks with these kids. I've actually met, over the years, a number of kiddos that participated at various levels and various sort of success metrics, if you will, but every single one of those students speaks of the experience fondly, in the sense that, I learned so much, and what they will almost always tell you when you really sort of dig in about what was the thing you learned the most of, and so what they will tell you, and I'm curious, Ankesh, as a participant yourself and still being involved so many years later, what they tell me is that they learned a lot about themselves.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:04] And they learned not just about their strengths and weaknesses, but they learned about how to sort of channel or funnel aspiration into reality. So, talk to us just a little bit about sort of your experience with sort of carrying some of those things forward, sort of from that mindset of somebody who's young, because this could be incredibly intimidating, and yet that is one of the other things that I would argue, yes, you could see some nervous kids along the way, but I would argue, these kids are fearless.

Ankesh Madan: [00:26:37] Yeah. Actually, I think Nancy has a couple of really good stories about this. I'll kind of let her tell as well. But just from my perspective, I mean, the biggest things, I think, that we tend to see the students take away, and I mean even I took away, were that the hard skills are really important, right? Learning to do business modeling, learning to do some of the budgeting, the marketing plans, all of that stuff, even like designing and building prototypes, all of that is really important.

Ankesh Madan: [00:27:02] But I think one of the things that we tend to see the challenge really gives maybe like some of the first exposure to is development of soft skills, networking with others, trying to understand how to leverage your networks to help your organization, help your idea. What we see is it's not just about—no

entrepreneur is in a bubble when they're building their solution to a problem. It takes a village, right? Every single successful entrepreneur out there can probably point to hundreds of people that have helped them in their journey. And I think that's a really key piece of this is the soft skills necessary to build, cultivate, and leverage your network to help you succeed.

Ankesh Madan: [00:27:39] That's something that we've started kind of focusing on more in recent years. I think now, students will have kind of networking sessions prior to the summit, even after summit, to try to continue to maintain the networks. A lot of students even bring business cards now, so they can start to kind of have these relationships. And of course, LinkedIn even has been a really good tool. So, I think the networking piece has been a big one that we've recognized that really can be helpful.

Ankesh Madan: [00:28:07] But also, I think we've just begun tapping the surface of how you can leverage the Conrad Challenge network both, not only your cohort necessarily in a certain year, but also the alumni. How do you leverage your alumni network to continue to build your businesses, build your companies, maybe down the road, solve challenges that you come across in college, post-college? I think this network piece is probably the biggest one we've seen uptick in, but also where there's still the most opportunity.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:39] Yeah. I would argue that is boundless opportunity for a student who will embrace it. I'm curious, Nancy, sort of as we think about the sort of full circle in the conversation, one of the sort of big pushes that we're seeing a lot in education today, certainly, both in the US, but global as well, has tied to the process of ensuring that students understand and utilize empathy, right? And that they are full individual participants in their community, and understanding, and respecting sort of the lives of others. And that is one of the pieces that I have found as a judge that you can see back in the students and the students' presentation.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:26] And I mentioned earlier that I see students having a pretty interesting or engaging perspective around culture, although that's not the way that they articulated it. That's me with my anthropologist hat on. But the reality of it is you can see these kids thinking about the world from not just, I'm going to solve a problem, but I'm solving sort of human and environmental issues in a manner that is based on compassion and worldly understanding. How does the Challenge do that? Because it's really difficult thing for many folks to teach, and yet almost every single presentation I watch, the kids are channeling this.

Nancy Conrad: [00:30:07] So, when I say pull, it's in the kids, and that is their world view, and part of that is the network that surrounds them, that found their vibe and their tribe, if you will. And when you're doing this kind of work, I'll give you a perfect example of what you're talking about. I think it's perfect. There are some kids in Miami about, okay, I think it was when you competed, Ankesh, 2010.

Nancy Conrad: [00:30:40] They created a water purification system, portable, low cost, and they kept tweaking it year over year, and they created it really during the earthquake in Haiti, as how could they do social good? How could they create something that would impact the lives of people that weren't as fortunate as they are? So, that developed and kept improving over the years, it ended up in a birthing clinic in the Congo.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:07] Wow.

Nancy Conrad: [00:31:10] Yeah. And babies used to come out of the womb washed in dirty water, but because of these kids out of Florida, babies were washed in clean water. And so, the rate of death at birth went down exponentially. I think they're still in deployment in at least nine countries, and it seems like almost, I don't know what the percentage is, I'd have to take a rubric against it to tell you the answer, but a high percentage of the students' innovation benefit humanity, and that's built into the competition, because we ask

them to do that. They work in sustainability, how would you benefit, create a commercially viable product that benefits a community, either global or local? So, it's built-in.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:03] It is built-in. And I think that the other thing, Nancy, that certainly, I have seen is I think if I were to put my finger on it, part of it is because the challenge by design believes these kids can't.

Nancy Conrad: [00:32:16] Oh, absolutely.

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:18] Right? But that's incredibly powerful that there is this great thing, the Conrad Challenge, and you think about all the business, and industry, and entrepreneurs that are behind this thing and are involved in this thing, collectively saying, we believe you can solve this problem. As a whole host of industries, we haven't gotten there yet, but we wonder if maybe you can. That is so incredibly empowering to young people who are craving a place and space in the world to be acknowledged for something in a very early age.

Nancy Conrad: [00:32:56] And it really lays the foundation for innovative workforce. We don't know what jobs are going to look like in five years. Ankesh, you totally secured venture capital. We don't know what it's going to be, robotics or whatever, whatever. When you build a whole generation of innovative thinkers, agile thinkers, the opportunity to sustain the knowledge-based economy increases, plus you've got young people who are very engaged in sustainability, but the planet of humanity, it's good cause, I should say.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:36] It is absolutely, and I say, thank goodness for them, right? Because we're not doing a good job, some of these older generations, quite frankly, in sort of the space that we're standing in right now, so much of it could have been avoided, and yet we were hopeful that these young folks can sort of-

Nancy Conrad: [00:33:54] I have a cute story I'll share with you. One of our teachers from Mexico, it's about 2019, we were live at Kennedy Space Center, and he walked up to me, and he said, your energy is amazing, what do you take? I said, injections. He said, I knew it. What do you think? I said, hope, the injections of hope every year from these kids, they are mind-blowing, and just so grateful to be able to bring them a framework, where they can grow and bloom. And some of them are lone wolves, and walk in with a team of kids, and they're not lone wolves anymore. And you see them right in front of your very eyes just get comfortable and find their authentic self, which is stunning to watch.

Annalies Corbin: [00:34:45] Yeah, it is, I agree. I've seen it so many times and it is really wonderful. I always like to close this program with sort of imagining the folks that are listening, and saying, hey, that is amazing, how could I do that in my own community? How do I get access or how can I change sort of the direction of the lives of kids? So, Ankesh, from the participant perspective, if you're a teacher in Brazil, or a teacher in rural America, or in India listening to this and you're thinking about, how can I take some of what I've heard? And whether my students participate in the Challenge or not, how can I make a difference in their lives? What would you say to those individuals out there trying to change those lives?

Ankesh Madan: [00:35:28] I mean, from my perspective, I think that I was really, really fortunate, in that my teacher back in high school that really was our coach, she's actually a member of the Conrad Challenge Advisory Board now, Myra Halpin, big shoutout to Dr. Halpin, she's incredible. And she's brought so many teams to the challenge over the years, and really, what it came down to is not saying no, right? It doesn't take much.

Ankesh Madan: [00:35:51] All it takes as a teacher, as an educator, is giving students a platform to explore their own ingenuity, explore their own ideas. And for us, that's all it took, was, I think like later in life, in college,

in your first few jobs, someone might say, oh, there's no money in microgrids for rural communities, but when you're in high school, when you're working on these projects, no one has said no to you yet.

Ankesh Madan: [00:36:16] And ideally, as an educator, the best thing you can do is say yes, and, explore this, explain this to me, tell us why this is going to work. Build an elegant, build a sustainable business model around this problem you want to solve. And of course, for Conrad Challenge's world, I think it's a good framework for educators to say, look, let us be your coach, let us be your mentor, and help provide guidance as you kind of work through this challenge and through this competition. So, I think those are some of the ways that at least educators have really, really been a huge influence in my life. And I think there's always an opportunity for educators to really kind of guide students in these journeys.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:55] Yeah, absolutely. Nancy, what would you add to that? Same question to you.

Nancy Conrad: [00:36:59] All the teams must have a coach, and a coach can also be a parent, an afterschool person, a grandparent, a worker in a factory, a venture capitalist, a professor. So, as long as they have an adult with them, could be a college student, I love the two words, yes, and. I use it all the time. People start saying, and I go, no, yes, and. So, yes, and there are multiple ways for young people to participate in this kind of learning. We are one of them. Do I think we're the best one?

Nancy Conrad: [00:37:36] Of course, I do. Otherwise, I wouldn't be split on why I'm doing this, because it's a labor of love. I really love what we do, and I'm grateful for the opportunity to bring this to the students and to all the people that we work with, including the judges. We just believe that these kids can do it. So, it's our belief in them that I think is the engine that drives this little buzz around the world. And by the way, I mean, we've gone from Australia to Zimbabwe, and everything in between, we never went and did direct outreach to any single country.

Nancy Conrad: [00:38:14] We do now have a couple of countries that work with us and bring the competition into their country, which is also an opportunity for countries to look at. They can host their own Challenge, and then the kids get to come to summit. But this happened organically, because the kids found it. They drive it. They form the teams. They pick their coach. And Myra is one of the most outstanding educators I've ever met. We also have, by the way, a Teacher of the Year Award, that's my award, and it's a credential for the students.

Nancy Conrad: [00:38:49] It's part of their portfolio. It's one of the top credentials for college admission at this point. Wow. Plus, it acknowledges the school and the teacher. They get this super cool Buck Rogers kind of statue that goes to their school for a year, kind of a plaque and they get recognized. I think that giving kids their moonshot, it is really moonshots and Earth shot, by the way, everything about space is really about Earth, so embracing these kids and giving them an opportunity to just be full, and to think, and to understand, and to create, and to be part of what tomorrow looks like, wow.

Annalies Corbin: [00:39:38] Yeah, I would agree. I would agree on so many different levels. So, Nancy and Ankesh, thank you so much for making time in your day to share about the Conrad Challenge with all of us. And for our listeners around the world, I cannot advocate enough, go to the website, take a look, think about your community, form a team, support a team, be part of the Conrad Challenge, you will not be sorry. So, thank you guys again.

Nancy Conrad: [00:40:08] Well, it is now. We are right in the first section of the entry for the competition. So, now.

Annalies Corbin: [00:40:16] Now. Absolutely, now. That's the final message now to everybody. So, thank you both so much.

Nancy Conrad: [00:40:22] Thank you.

Ankesh Madan: [00:40:23] Thanks, Annalies. Thanks for having us.

Annalies Corbin: [00:40:25] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media at Annalies Corbin and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.