



130. Choreographing Ambitious, Messy Change with Dan McClure

Dan McClure: [00:00:00] Look at the big challenge, and then see where the problems are that are most interesting and most powerful that you can act up.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:10] 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: [00:00:44] So, in today's episode of Learning Unboxed, we are going to talk about one of my favorite subjects, you've heard me talk about systems over and over again on this program, and today, we're actually going to talk about systems innovation. And joining us today for that conversation is Dan McClure, who is a specialist in disruptive systems innovation, and we will get him to explain what all of that means to us here in a few moments. And throughout a 40-year career, he has been, and I quote, and I love this very much, "a choreographer of ambitious, messy change." I don't think that could be any better way to introduce somebody to join this particular program. And today, Dan is a Founding Partner of Innovation Ecosystem. So, Dan, welcome to this messy, ambitious endeavor.

Dan McClure: [00:01:33] This sounds like great fun.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:37] It'll absolutely be a great time. I think that one of the things that will really sort of help the stage for our listeners who come to us from all over the world is just give us a little bit about what you think of when you use the word system, and more in particular, system innovation. What is that thing?

Dan McClure: [00:01:54] Yeah. So, systems thinking and systems has really become the buzzword over the last few years. And it's one of those early buzzwords that hasn't really found its shape yet, I think. So, for many people, systems is about technical analysis of how do you connect together all these things and simulate a system for other people. It's about how do we get individuals and organizations to work together.

Dan McClure: [00:02:25] And really, what we look at when we talk about system and what we mean by system innovation is the idea that the way you create value in the world, the way that you actually do something with impact and of real significance is by bringing together people, technology, partners, resources, and connecting them all up so that we don't actually solve big problems with a silver bullet, but rather, we solve them with an interconnection of different people, activities, and resources. And that's what systems are about for us. And system innovation is really the ability to shape those systems in ways that do new and exciting things.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:12] Absolutely. And we do talk about this all the time. And a lot of our listeners are educators, obviously, Learning Unboxed, that just sort of makes sense, who come to us from all over with all different types of, first and foremost, the system in which they're working in locally, right? They're all fairly unique to a local endeavor, and yet they are all part of a much, much larger ecosystem or system, if you will, that is tied to their industry.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:37] And there's the post-secondary component of it, and there's a K-12 component of it, and there are charter schools, and private schools, and public schools, and afterschool, all of these different sort of tangle, if you will, of components. And one of the reasons I was excited about this conversation today is because educators are always constantly wrestling, I would like to, I guess, phrase it that way, wrestling with a whole set of systems that, on many levels, were never engineered to operate together, much less to be so intertwined as they are today. And so, I was super, super curious about how your work sort of lends itself to you thinking about this dilemma in education.

Dan McClure: [00:04:26] I think it's really interesting. Once you step back and sort of like take that big picture view, so you see the whole system, there's a lot of things you can start to do. So, one is address the problem that you mentioned, which is System A doesn't play well with System B, which doesn't even like System C. And as a result, you end up with just barriers and flaws in performance that are hard to solve just simply because the systems don't work together.

Dan McClure: [00:05:00] And so, there's this opportunity to connect and make existing systems work well. I think, though, today, what I find most exciting is the possibility of saying A, B, and C, all three of those systems are outdated. And so, what we really ought to be thinking about is, what if we swept all of those away and brought in a new vision for a different system?

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:26] Oh, be still, my heart, Dan. Be still, my heart. This is my whole passion.

Dan McClure: [00:05:34] And this can't be done casually. I think anybody who steps back and appreciates the complexity of a system, you can't be sitting there saying, oh, and tomorrow, I'm going to go out and reinvent an entire system, but that big picture view does give you permission to think at that level. And I think that's what I find most exciting right now. We could try to fix and make a 16th century educational model basically work better, but maybe what we really should be doing is imagining what this current century's educational model would look like, and with all the tools and resources that we've got.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:16] Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I cannot tell you how much I agree with that, and as part of the premise of this program is that very thing. But I also think that one of the other pieces that's really intriguing about the work that you do and the way that you're doing that work is around this idea about disruptive change. And again, you pointed out that we could spend time trying to fix this system that's quite frankly obsolete, I think, is a term I use all the time tied to this, but we've been doing that for a really long time.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:50] We have been throwing trillions and trillions of dollars globally at trying to fix a system that, quite frankly, it worked great as designed when designed, but it has become obsolete not just recently, but over, quite frankly, a pretty long period of time at this point. And so, when we sort of think about that from an opportunity standpoint, how do we go about taking advantage of the fact that we have a moment. Quite frankly, the global pandemic was not a great thing in so many different ways. However, it did provide us, collectively, I think, with a moment of pause, and we can do several things with that moment of pause, right?

Dan McClure: [00:07:31] Yeah. So, one of my favorite statistics, and I'm going to jump out of education for a moment over into health care, which is another one of the sectors that was really affected by the global

pandemic, so during the first six months of the pandemic in North America, the level of use of digital health, remote health services increased by 16,000%.

Dan McClure: [00:07:59] And so, what that tells you is it's possible to introduce the shocks to the system that just opened the door to suddenly completely new opportunities that scale up very, very rapidly. I think in many ways, the pandemic was more than just a pause. It was a shock to the system. And you basically have an opportunity to break the status quo. And everybody says, oh, you're breaking the status quo, that's got to be bad, but if you're capable of reinventing a new system in its place, breaking the status quo is actually a really powerful and potent thing to do.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:41] Oh, absolutely. And we see that all the time as well, lots and lots of conversation sort of swirling around in the world of education about, oh, we can't wait until we get back to normal or a new normal, and I push on that all the time, I hate that phrasing, because I would like to point out, normal wasn't working for the majority of children, back to your preface around US, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:07] Let's narrow it down a little bit, right? So, normal wasn't working for the majority of our students, so why would a new normal be that much better? It's not. It's a Band-Aid approach when so many schools are just trying to get back to something that felt familiar, but familiar doesn't necessarily sort of get us where we want to or need to be.

Dan McClure: [00:09:29] And what's striking is the demands on education aren't so constant here. So, this isn't that we've got an educational challenge that's the same as we faced 15 or 50 years ago. Education needs to do new things, and I don't think, even if we had had a perfectly performing system before, the new demands that are being placed on education really say, we're going to have to change that system simply to meet these new demands. And that sort of phrasing it in a negative sense of like, there are demands, but, oh, my God, there are opportunities.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:09] Oh, absolutely.

Dan McClure: [00:10:11] Think about the technologies that are available today, will make us look silly for getting excited by tablets in the classroom.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:19] Oh, right. Yeah, no question.

Dan McClure: [00:10:21] There is just so much that can be done now. And the possibilities for big solutions that span multiple elements of our lives, why, for example, have we always thought of knowledge as something that happens in a school? Why aren't we weaving the acquisition and use of knowledge into our entire lives? And that sounds sort of like one of those late night talk show kinds of things, oh, we ought to weave it into our lives, but it's technically possible now. And I think that's what's really exciting, is there are so many more things that we could do to get ourselves up to this challenge.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:04] Yeah, absolutely. And I think that the whole landscape of accessibility, you know that the option and opportunity, if you will, tied to accessibility of information, of data, right? And the ability for anybody to very quickly, quite frankly, anymore learn how to not only get access to that data, but manipulate the data, and utilize the data, and analyze the data for the common good. Now, also, we're seeing this all over the news frequently, a lot of bad use of data, but that comes with everything. There's always going to be good and bad, tied to a whole variety of components, and yet we still have this grand opportunity.

Dan McClure: [00:11:43] Yeah. I like the phrase grand opportunity, because I think it begins to set your goals at the right level. When we advised like corporate clients as they're trying to reinvent their businesses in whatever industry they are, one of the things we talk about is the first step is to lift your eyes up high enough so that you see the scope of opportunity that's available to you, because it's so easy to be focused on what even feels like in an ambitious fix to your existing system. And there are literally grand opportunities.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:22] Oh, absolutely. I talk with the kids all the time that come to the PAST Innovation Labs, where you see behind you, about the fact that one of the absolute premises that we have, that every kiddo that walks in the door is capable of solving the world's biggest, hairy, most audacious problems, because they're so creative and so unconstrained, right? And if we can just take the lessons of that experience of watching that unconstrained, problem-solving, exuberant, you name it, that sort of lightbulb immersive innovation, if you will, and could more broadly apply it, then imagine what would be possible.

Dan McClure: [00:13:06] Yeah. So, I'd like to challenge, though, a bit of that narrative, because one of the things, I think, we've seen for a number of years now in innovation is this idea that innovation is about creativity, it's about having ideas. And I would argue that when you talk about individual innovators, it is more about discovering the type of talent you have to create, and what is the gift you bring to that creative effort, and then empowering that.

Dan McClure: [00:13:38] And that allows somebody who might not be an idea engine but is an action hero to actually find their place in this innovation ecosystem. And by viewing innovation as a systems activity, there are more and more places where different types of people can fit in, in this sort of creative endeavor. And I think one of the big jobs of education now is to prepare as many different types of people to be creative participants as we can.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:10] Absolutely. I 100% agree with you. Absolutely. Spot on. Love that. Can we dig in a little bit, Dan, one of the things that you sent over ahead of this conversation was this concept or this idea tied to being, for disruptors to be successful, you've got to do big things. And you sent over a list of three key, well, I would call them actions, but I think there are ways of thinking about what you're going to do. And I would really love to dig in on these three, because I think they have absolute direct application to what's happening right now.

Dan McClure: [00:14:48] Yeah. So the first kind of ties into our earlier conversation, which is seeing problems differently. So many people, when they start to innovate, they almost immediately jump to the solution. They've kind of assumed the problem in their head, and then they go to fix it. And oftentimes, the best problem, and problems have levels of quality to them, the best problem is one that creates big impact and is tractable.

Dan McClure: [00:15:20] And often, that's not the one that's the most obvious to somebody. So, to start, a system innovator really looks at the entire system that's involved with all the things that they're concerned about. So, for example, in elementary school education, there was a study that looked at why young girls did or did not excel in reading. And there were obviously programs targeted at supporting girls and their reading efforts, et cetera.

Dan McClure: [00:15:54] But if you take that lens and you move it back, one of the things that you realize is that there's a strong correlation between whether a mother is literate and whether children, daughters can read. And so, now, by pulling this lens back, we say, oh, maybe our place of action is actually parental literacy instead of extra in-classroom action. And this idea of when you understand the system, you can see more places that you can act is a really powerful concept.

Dan McClure: [00:16:30] Because oftentimes, you can get around the kinds of barriers that were blocking your action before, as well as finding like the places that you can get real power. So, that's like the first thing. Look at the big challenge, and then see where the problems are that are most interesting and most powerful that you could act on. So, that's the first thing system repair does.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:55] That's awesome. And that is one of those pieces where I, and that the example was spot on as it relates to trying to figure out, okay, what's that thing that you think you need to solve? But then, what's actually causing the initial problem to begin with? And I appreciate that very much, because sometimes, I think we forget to ask those bigger questions.

Dan McClure: [00:17:16] And it can feel like, it's funny, I was working with an innovation lab in Jordan, and we had some folks from UNICEF who were there, and we had literally a knockdown, drag out yelling at each other fight, because the feeling was it would take too much time to understand that big problem system, and there wasn't enough time to look at the big picture. And the problems were just too urgent to spend all that time thinking about things.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:52] But if you don't think about it, it's just a Band-Aid, your solution will only be a Band-Aid, or at least only be a piece of it, right?

Dan McClure: [00:17:59] You could have joined me on my side of the knockdown, drag out fight. But I think the other part of that is you don't really need to know all the details of every problem. You can learn a lot about a problem, even with a quick stepping back. And so, it's getting in the habit of that stepping back that really matters. The second thing, though, and this is really crucial once you do start taking action, is you have to understand that the solution is not just the one thing that you want to work on.

Dan McClure: [00:18:35] And I mentioned tablets earlier. Tablets in the classroom have just so many examples of places where they've been inserted into an educational environment, and then nothing happened. And one particular program that I had a chance to engage with, they had done a fabulous job of doing all the user-centered design. They had literally some of the best designers in the world working on this tablet and everything.

Dan McClure: [00:19:05] And then, they rolled it into the classroom for their first trial, and none of the teachers used it. And it's because the tablet required the teacher to change the way they taught. And there's nothing wrong with that, but nobody had planned for that. And so, the technology, as a solution, as an isolated solution, wasn't enough. You needed to affect the entire classroom.

Dan McClure: [00:19:35] Fast forward a few more months, there was the realization that, oh, the content streams coming into this platform also needed an entire system reinvention. And so, you just keep going, and you say, for this to work, for any educational system to work, all the pieces need to be in place. And this is one of the things that a system innovator brings to the table is they bring this ability to see, here are all the pieces that we're going to have to figure out how to make work together.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:05] Yeah, absolutely. And what's that third one then?

Dan McClure: [00:20:10] Okay. So, the third one is the one that gets me the most excited, actually, literally get chills when I talk about these sorts of things. This is what I'd like to do if I'm sitting around with a bunch of people, just brainstorming stuff. One of the big paths for change in systems is when you break apart an old, fully integrated system, and then you've got all these pieces, so it's sort of like having your Lego dinosaur all

built up, and then you break it into individual pieces of Legos, and all of a sudden, you can build something new.

Dan McClure: [00:20:48] Except in today's world, you don't simply get all the dinosaur Lego pieces. It's like somebody comes with a dump truck full of other Lego pieces that you can add to this mix. And this unbundling, which is basically breaking apart existing services, and then reassembling them in new ways, with all the new technologies, capabilities, and possibilities that are out there, that's where system innovation really begins to shine.

Dan McClure: [00:21:19] Because what you're doing is you're building an entirely new system out of the pieces that you've got. And you're seeing this unbundling going on in all sorts of sectors. Hospitals are being broken into pieces. That's part of what the whole digital health thing was doing. But education itself is being broken into many pieces now. And we've got a large university MOOCs out there that are offering wonderful content online, often free, but you have to ask, so why do I need the university then?

Dan McClure: [00:21:55] And you can also ask, why can't I bring in new partners? Son, just in sort of scribbling while we were trying to get through our Zoom challenges earlier today, I was thinking, so what if Ford decided to offer education? So, you're going to now get your degree from Ford, which will be provided in your self-driving car, and it will be a learning environment tailored to your specific career, and jobs, and everything, because of course, we now know everything about you, and it will be provided in a learning space that has all the tools for you to best learn and engage.

Dan McClure: [00:22:40] How does then even a Harvard compete with that? Because this is woven into your life, it's tailored to you, and it doesn't require the existing systems and people to be in place. So, maybe it's a crazy idea that has no value at all, but that's the kind of thing that you can start to imagine once you start putting the Legos together of all the pieces that are out there, and we've got a global Lego box right now. It's not just the Legos of the US or the Legos of Europe, it's like we've got pieces everywhere.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:13] We do. And again, I go back to one of the statements earlier, we have this amazing opportunity, right? Because again, and I love the example about the health care, and the telehealth, and the telemedicine, because we often saw, prior to the pandemic, that there would be a 60-minute program about, oh, this rural community, and they solved this person's terrible, terrible medical issue by promoting in with a Mayo Clinic and all this kind of, but that was the rarity.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:42] It wasn't the everyday way we solved these medical issues, and yet very, very quickly, to your point, we ramped up, we grabbed that technology that, quite frankly, was already here, it already existed, we just had not deployed it, and we made it possible to get through that particular moment. And the hope is then, of course, that it has a legacy component that we don't undo, that we're able to sort of move forward with.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:06] And so, I'm curious a little bit about the way that you would think about working with a very, very dysfunctional school district, and there are a lot of them out there. There are a lot of really great ones, full disclosure and fairness, but there are a fair number that are super, super dysfunctional. And they're not because that they are not well-intended people and it's not because they are, sometimes, not well-funded, and it's not because they don't have the best interest of children at heart.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:36] But oftentimes, what I find in my work of going out, and sitting down, and having conversations with those very communities is they can't get over that we've always done it this way before. And the example that I have is a school district that was spending many, many, many tens of thousands of

dollars more than they needed to on busing routes, because they hadn't changed the busing route in 30 years, despite the fact that the community's population was dispersed in ways that it had never been dispersed before.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:08] And so, the dysfunction tied to the fact that they had never, ever changed what was happening with the buses, a ripple effect into everything. They couldn't get the kids to school on time, to start on time. And so, that meant the school was either always trying to lag at the end of the day or very valuable, in their mind, things they should be teaching, they didn't have time for anymore because, and it was just this crazy ripple effect. And when I said, well, why are we running buses like we did 30 years ago? Why don't we just change that? You could have heard a pin drop in the room. What's that about?

Dan McClure: [00:25:47] So, I think that touches on a couple of key things that system innovators wrestle with. The first is that things are connected. When you pull one string or you push one button, something on the other side of the room falls over. And that's one of the things that's both powerful and challenging about this. I'm always skeptical when I walk into a place, and it feels like it is so obvious that you should make this change, why haven't you done it?

Dan McClure: [00:26:19] And one of the cautions that I think I've come to, well, oftentimes, it's like, yeah, really, you should make this change, but oftentimes, what you're not seeing is the connections and the links that make it prudent, actually, to keep things the way they are. And so, I think part of this is stepping back, and saying, alright, what really is constraining you? Is it just simply nobody bothered to go around and look at the bus routes or are there other things about the way things are set up that that's tangled up with other stuff? And I think this is part of when you do system innovation, I mentioned before, it's not just about ideas.

Dan McClure: [00:27:07] One of the key jobs here is to really connect, and see how things are tied together, and deal with those connections, and find ways to get everybody on board. We call that role a choreographer, to distinguish it from like an inventor or whatever. And the choreographer's job is really to see the big picture and make sure that everybody gets a pony. So, they may not all get the same pony. So, you may find that a school administrator needs one thing, a teacher needs a different thing, and a student needs yet another thing, but in the end, if the system is going to work, somebody needs to make sure that there are trade-offs and rewards so that everybody in that system is getting a pony.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:55] Yeah, absolutely. So, I always like to wrap up this program recognizing that people just spent about a half-hour with us listening to you and I have a chit chat about things that get us all jazzed and excited, and the hope is that that a listener, there are nuggets here of things that they're like, ah, I just really would like to do that thing or grab a piece of what I just heard Dan talking about, and take it back into my school building, or into my community or even one of my industry partners.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:24] But it's really hard, because I'm out there in the big wild world, all by myself. And so, I always like to close by asking my guests, what do you say to that lone individual that's out there, saying, I want to do some of the things that I just heard Dan talking about, but how do I get started thinking about the circumstance and the space of the system that I'm operating in terms of what I can do to affect that differently?

Dan McClure: [00:28:52] So, I think the best thing you can do is find somebody else to talk with. I think system innovation, thinking about big things is best done as an activity amongst people. This doesn't mean, however, that you need to get a collection of everybody across the school district and have a consensus meeting or whatever, really talking, find some folks that are kindred spirits in what you want to do, how you think about things.

Dan McClure: [00:29:30] And then, deliberately take some of those steps, take a look back, step back and look at what the big picture challenge and the opportunity is. Do some reading around being a generalist. Don't assume that the answer is going to be in just your field of study. There might be some really interesting things happening over in health care that could provide you inspiration. And then, finally, come up with a big picture of what you want to do and start thinking about how you could move in that direction. This is really about getting the energy to think big, and then just taking the time to do it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:13] Yeah, absolutely. It's a big, scary step, but it can be so incredibly rewarding and fulfilling. And the reality is most folks have really creative thinkers, problem solvers, collaborators, you name it, all the buzzwords, in their communities. They're often just more than willing to help if you just ask.

Dan McClure: [00:30:36] And I think getting that conversation going, it's often surprising who those people are. One of the things that I find most interesting, when you talk to organizations, they say, you ask them who their superstars are, and oftentimes, they almost downplay the person who's the big picture thinker, because they're disruptive, and they're difficult, and et cetera. And so, think about that person who normally is a little bit difficult in a meeting or difficult in a conversation, because they're pushing beyond the comfort zone. Oftentimes, that's the best person to go and sit down with, and have a tea, and get some ideas going.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:17] Yeah, absolutely. Good advice. Dan, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to have this conversation with us to share your thoughts, and your innovation, and for choreographing, all the choreography that you do in your day-to-day world. We appreciate that so much.

Dan McClure: [00:31:33] Well, thank you very much. It's been a joy to be here.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:36] Thank you. 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 @Annalies Corbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.