133. Designing Education for the Real World with Vivian Shen of Juni Learning

Vivian Shen: [00:00:01] For me, it's about getting students across the world access to more and more incredible education experiences.

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.

So welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. I am, as always, super excited, because we get to talk about things that matter right now in the moment, in the world of education, and today, we're going to talk about an innovative online education platform. And joining us today for that conversation is Vivian Shen, who founded something called Juni Learning in 2017, an online education platform for seven to 18-year-olds.

And one of the things that I was really intrigued by and love about Juni Learning is that Vivian is on a personal and professional mission to provide students access to one-on-one teaching to ignite a passion for learning among all students, regardless of their interest in learning styles. And this is particularly of interest because Vivian's story ties directly to the design, development, and founding of Juni Learning. So, Vivian, welcome to the program.

Vivian Shen: [00:01:40] It's so great to be here. Thanks for having me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:42] So, let's start with just a very high level, set the stage for us and give us the context for what Juni Learning is. And then, we're going to backtrack and talk about the sort of the why you felt compelled to do this, but let's just get everybody's interest piqued and start with, what is this thing?

Vivian Shen: [00:02:00] Yeah. So, at Juni, our vision is that every student is empowered to take on the real world and make their mark. And practically, what that means is that they learn really fun educational skills through learning by doing and working with really amazing instructors. So, we've actually started with computer science, because it was such a tactical skill set that I think a lot of kids weren't getting in school, and we've expanded out to offer many different subjects for students all across the country and the world. So, yeah, it's been a wild ride.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:38] And wild rides are always the best in all honesty. And as one founder to another, it's also a tremendous amount of work, but it's also almost always when you start digging in with founders, it's a passion project, right? There was a reason you did this thing, because starting new companies, organizations,

endeavors, it's an epic lift, to be perfectly clear with folks. It's not an easy thing to do. So, tell us, Vivian, why did you feel compelled to do this?

Vivian Shen: [00:03:09] Yeah, I mean, education, it's a really interesting industry to work in, because everybody who is not even folks in the industry, but everyone in particular in the industry has such a unique learning experience and so much kind of personal investment in what they do and why they make the companies that they make. And so, that's definitely true for me. Education was a big part of my life growing up. My dad is actually a professor and my parents were able to immigrate to the US, because educational opportunities here.

They did their graduate degrees here. And so, it's always kind of been, even when I was much younger, something that was really emphasized as I was growing up. I wish I could talk a little bit more about it. That seed was always there. And so, throughout my career, this was always something that I kind of kept coming back to, which is how can I make such an important time in so many kids and students' lives really impactful for them and empowering for them? And that's sort of, yeah, the original seed of the company.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:13] Yeah. And I think, oftentimes, one of the things that I hear when we sort of talk about the way these endeavors get started up is that we always start with what we know. I think it's interesting that you said, oh, we started, at Juni, with computer science. And so, I assume that you have some knowledge and background in computer science, because our listeners are always going to be sort of curious about that component, why you chose that nugget as opposed to all the million other things that you could have chosen to start from the learning component. And you definitely have expanded since then, which we'll get into in just a minute. So, share with us a little bit about the whole, why computer science?

Vivian Shen: [00:04:50] Yeah. So, definitely, there was a couple of pieces. Obviously, from education standpoint, it's such an important topic for students to have a foundation in, because it's basically like learning a new language and a new way of thinking. And it's so important for any type of career these days, even if you're in marketing or something that feels pretty disconnected, so much of the foundational work is rooted in some kind of technical knowledge these days.

And that, from a market perspective, was a trend that we've been seeing for at least five to 10 years. And then, on the other side as well, schools have been not very well-equipped to teach computer science in particular. Obviously, right now, there's also a huge teacher shortage across every subject, but in particular, in computer science, it's really difficult to find great instructors.

And I think there's a lot of schools that have started doing introductory-level offerings, but it's quite difficult to find something that's incredibly advanced even at some of the best private schools in the US, let alone kind of a broader group. And so, we're seeing those two things in the market. And then, frankly as well, for me personally, I didn't start coding until college, and it's so much harder to pick something up when you got a ton of things going on, first of all, because college is always a bit crazy, but the amount of time that you have to kind of immerse yourself, learn that new language is really tough.

And so, for me, it was kind of a personal mission to try to get as many students, younger students exposed to computer science as early as possible, because you don't need to be an engineer, but it's always good to have exposure to different kinds of subjects early on. And that's actually also why when we expanded out into different subjects, we are really thoughtful about building subjects that were definitely foundational and important.

But also, we found, could have an impact on their careers later on or really help them in sort of what we call

real world ways versus just memorizing different parts of a flower or something like that. And I think there's such interesting applications for most of the subjects that we learn in school, but the way that we've taught them is not always rooted in that project-based application.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:12] Okay. So, I love the fact that you mentioned the difficulty around finding computer science teachers, and really finding computer science teachers that have a background and an experience, and quite frankly, a lack of fear in this space. Because traditional teacher prep programs didn't spend a lot of time historically focusing on getting teachers prepared to be computer science teachers, and by pushing computer science and coding, and opportunities tied to that further and further down into grade levels, elementary, and middle school, one of the things that we are seeing at PAST as a response to this is that teachers are suddenly being willing to learn what they perceive to be way outside of their areas of expertise, coding in computer science along with their kids.

And it's my hope that sort of stigma changes the tide around getting more people willing to go into computer science, because it's super, super important, and it is an absolute essential element for our students as they get ready for the world to work further down the pipeline. But I am really curious, even though the platform is specifically tied for students, what kind of experience or conversations are you having from educators in their own curiosity about what you've done with Juni Learning?

Vivian Shen: [00:08:23] Yeah, it's a great question, and I will caveat this with, historically, we've worked more directly with parents and students, and created sort of more of a direct family relationship, but we've started working more and more with schools and full-time teachers. And it's been really incredible to learn about the pain points that they have in ways that we can help support as well. We started a couple of pilots with schools actually recently, so it's been pretty interesting to see what the gaps are.

And what it definitely has come down to a certain extent, how do we learn, literally learn the subject matter? And then, also, how do we staff these sessions, find the time to do this in a school day when you already have all these requirements from the state and that kind of thing as well. But yeah, there's so much desire for teachers to learn this, and it's been really interesting, because it almost became more of a logistical question, where they're just like, how do we get this done instead of why? Which, I don't know that it was ever a why question, necessarily, but there are so many priorities going on.

And so, this is one of the ones where it's very grassroots from families as well, where parents at schools are asking for this, and then with the teachers as well. So, it's been really amazing to learn from them what some of the gaps are, and our curriculum as well was originally designed to be taught one-on-one. And so, as we've kind of updated the curriculum as well to work with a larger setting or work with a flipped classroom model, too, so that they could facilitate more students, that's been a steep learning curve for us, but it's really exciting, some of the progress we've made there, too.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:03] Yeah, absolutely. And I look forward actually over time to sort of hearing more about the sort of impact and the inroads that you're making there, because I suspect, and the folks will go out, and please do, take a look at Juni Learning, you're going to sort of see what Vivian's making reference to. And I think that there will, long-term, be some really intriguing desire and application for what the work that you're doing to be translated into not just that informal learning, but into the formal setting as well.

So, it's really interesting. I also want to talk a little bit, Vivian, because you expanded out, you started with computer science, but you actually now have several new sort of intriguing veins, if you will, in the platform. And so, I'd love to hear a little bit about, I know there's one on investing, there's one on data science, public speaking. They're disparate, they seem so unrelated, and yet I suspect there's a lot of consistency in terms of

the way you make the choices that you did, but also then the way that students could see how all these different pieces connect over time.

Vivian Shen: [00:11:07] Yeah, definitely. And it's really interesting because when we started building out our subjects originally, we kind of looked at it more like a traditional K-12 classroom, and we actually started, outside of coding, we went into math, more standard math, and then English as well. And so, those are the first two subjects that we expanded out into, but we sort of took a step back, and said, okay, are we actually teaching skills here or are we just teaching to curriculum or set of standards that's potentially not as helpful for students when they're outside of the K-12 ladder?

And so, that's when we did more research around, what are the careers of the future that folks will need to adjust into? What are some of the skills that those need? And that's why we did a little bit of a shift to focus more on these kind of skill areas where kids are really excited to learn, there's something practical there that they can add to their portfolio as well, but it's sort of foundational, can be applied to various different types of roles.

And so, for example, storytelling, that one is near and dear to me, because I actually minored in creative writing in college, but that's so important for any kind of role that you have, right? Because even if you're a very technical research scientist or something like that, you need to be able to present and write a paper to show your findings and communicate with different people, et cetera.

And so, that's really important. And even with investing, I think a lot of what's been really interesting to find is it's sort of like an investing and economics-focused course. And there are so many kids who naturally understand how supply and demand work, and all of these things from video games, but they haven't just put like the words to the concepts that they're seeing as well. And so, it's just been really fun to launch these subjects, where kids are like, oh, wow, I knew some of this intuitively, but it's really interesting that this is an actual career or this is something that I can do.

And so, with the investing course, it's actually funny, because we get no actual stock advice here, my heavy disclaimer, but a lot of kids, like they know about stocks, because they're playing Roblox, and they're like, I would buy Roblox stock, because all my friends use Roblox and things like that, they're starting to pick that up. So, kind of giving them that outlet and that way to formalize it a little bit has been, yeah, just incredible in those subjects.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:38] Yeah, absolutely. And kids like that because they can figure out how it relates to them, so that's part of that lift, that's sort of taken care of it for you, which is a really sort of lovely thing to see. So, I'm super intrigued in particular about the public speaking program that you got, because I love the fact that you partnered with TEDx to get this done. And the reason I love this is because every time I go and spend any time working with kiddos, sort of getting ready to do presentations, I'm like, have you watched TEDx?

Do you understand some of the theories of action that go on with this? Let's think about some of the skills that you can grab out of what you see on your favorite TEDx, or two or three favorite TEDx that you've watched. And how could you kind of make some of those strategies your own? And it comes up over and over again. And so, I was really excited, actually, to sort of see this. So, share with us a little bit about sort of how you got that partnership started. What does it mean, in practical sense, for student signed up for that course? What do the students sort of get out of that? What are the expectations?

Vivian Shen: [00:14:33] Yeah, of course. And huge shoutout to the curriculum and partnerships team at Juni, because they're really the ones who did the heavy lifting here. And to your point, a lot of students, we like to

give them the scaffolding to get out of their comfort zone. And so, it's one thing to do a public speaking course where the audience is just your parents or maybe a couple other kids, but it's another thing to say, okay, I'm going to make this public for many other people to learn more about my story.

And so, that's been really, really interesting, because every course that we have outside of this one as well, we end it with kind of capstone project that all students do. And so, for the public speaking one, yeah, it enables them to submit it into this TEDx program and they can actually get it public for everybody to see. And that little bit of impetus to say, okay, this is a little bit more formal for what I'm doing and I do kind of need to straighten my tie a little bit. It gives them that extra push to get out there.

And I do think that it's really cool to see students adding these kinds of things to their resume almost and their portfolio. Even with our novel writing course, too, at the end of the course, you write a full novel, you can publish it if you want. Amazon actually lets you self-publish books and things like that as well, so that's always a ton of fun for them to do, and we try to keep every course that we have with one of these projects, really build towards that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:09] Yeah, that's a great thing to do, and the kids get so much out of it, and one of the things that I love is because they build confidence over time. It's really interesting, because when we scaffold our programs, we do a lot of piloting of programs at the PAST Foundation and the Innovation Lab by design. And so, one of the things that happens, so for example, in the summertime, we will have programs that will run eight or 10 weeks, not the same program, but they'll run for a week, and we will have kids that will start in week one and stay all eight weeks.

And every week, it's a different program, a different camp, and every single one of those programs requires, at the end of the week, you have to stand up and do a public presentation about what you experienced, what you learned that week. And at the end of the first week, almost always, you barely get some of those kids the first time out of the gate to stand up.

That is a very nervous and a bit traumatic for some kids, but by the end, they're explaining to the other kids that are new, well, this is how you do it, and this is how it's going to work, and you can just watch their confidence grow and build. And it's one of the things that I love about the way you scaffolded this work, because you're recognizing that kids, you got to meet them where they are and they can grow with you.

Vivian Shen: [00:17:21] Yeah. No, 100%. And I love that you mentioned that actually, because the way that we built the platform is that even in our computer science, in our coding classes, kids can record a little video of themselves explaining their project and publish it to the platform and it's public for everybody to see. And we built sort of different gradations in which you can make your project public, so you can just make it public without recording anything. You can also just record audio, and then you can kind of do the audio and video. And we do see over time, with a little bit of encouragement, they start publishing first, and then they add the audio and kind of like getting up to that level where they feel confident.

To your point a little bit as well, a lot of kids need a little bit of a push, because it's always easy to not show off what you're working on, but sort of once you get that first—it's a little bit addictive for them. I think that when you get that first little bit of validation and you see like other people build your project or they like, whatever the case is, and you kind of get the momentum going, and you feel confident, and feel like you're good at something,, yeah, which is huge. So, that's definitely a big part of what we do as well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:29] Yeah, absolutely. So, I'm also curious, Vivian, so let's talk a little bit about the instruction or the instructors, right? Because the platform is offering a real wide array, quite frankly, of things

that people can learn, the students can learn. So, how do you then, because I assume, and I could be wrong, that you don't have this entire pantheon of these instructors all in-house, all the time 24/7, so to speak, that you actually have to, through some mechanism, find the appropriate person to be, and lead the instruction, and to inspire. So, what does that look like? I'm curious about that part.

Vivian Shen: [00:19:08] Yeah, it's a great question. So, for our private classes, we've actually built all of the curriculum in-house with our curriculum team, and so that provides a lot of kind of stable progress across different instructors for students. And so, the instructors that we do hire, we interview them definitely for subject matter expertise, but mainly for classroom management, how much are they able to challenge students and support them at the same time? Like, that balance is quite tough. A little higher energy as well, because I think teaching over Zoom is an acquired skill.

And so, those are some of the things that we look for with our instructors. And then, we do actually hire them as employees of the company. And so, when we match students and instructors together, a lot of it's definitely based on availability, but we'll look at things like personality types. Is there a special request from the parent or student with learning differences? All of that kind of thing as well. And our team kind of does that matching in-house. But really, the curriculum is kind of this living, breathing product for us, where the instructors make it better over time as well by giving us feedback on it.

And we have a couple of things in the works to kind of scale up the curriculum and kind of the types of courses that could come on the platform as well, because instructors come to us all the time, and they're like, I wish I could teach a class on crypto or I wish I could do this. And so, what's the path to do that? And I think there's a lot of exciting stuff there.

But yeah, and our instructors, I would say, they're folks, who, as a parent, you would want your kids to look up to as a role model and somebody that they want to eventually hopefully become. And so, it's been really rewarding to watch the instructors actually go from being a freshman in college when they first start working with us, to some of them, we've actually hired full time into various roles at the company, like engineers and all of these kinds of things. So, it's very cool to see that evolution for the instructor side as well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:09] Yeah, absolutely. That's fabulous. I like the fact that they get multiple entry points and can find themselves being part of the team long term. That makes such a huge difference. One of the things that I can imagine that folks who are listening are thinking is, okay, this is awesome, but this is all online. We've just spent the last almost 24 months, we're getting close to that, in the midst of this global pandemic, with everything shifting to a lot of just online only, some hybrid, some in-person. How does Juni Learning deal with and think about our battle, take your pick, which word makes the most sense in your scenario? Just this notion that kids are exhausted of being on screens. How has that played out for you during this time?

Vivian Shen: [00:21:59] Yeah, it's tough. I mean, before COVID, it was interesting because we were setting the pace on online learning, right? I felt like I was preaching this crazy gospel and people were not really believers. And then, just obviously through the world changing so much, everybody is required to be on Zoom, and we just saw a ton of people who were really happy about it.

And now, I think it's kind of gone back a little bit to be somewhere in between, where it works so well for many students, and I think that it's always easy to focus on the students who are on the stories that you see in the news and things like that. But for so many students, it enables them to have flexibility and it enables them to meet instructors that normally they never would be able to meet and also connect with other students kind of where they're at.

However, at the same time, I feel it myself working on Zoom all day, it's tiring. There is something about whatever the studies have shown about staring at yourself for too long. And so, we typically encourage students to do a bit more of the hybrid model. And so, a lot of students will kind of do, they'll do a couple hours a week with us, and then they'll have their in-person school or sports, et cetera.

But really, the way that we see time online is there's always going to be a time where instead of watching Netflix, could you be doing something more productive? Or, if you are able to actually be creating something instead of consuming something, that's a very different story as well. And so, those are the times where we've been kind of getting more and more time from students and seeing that be really productive, but yeah, definitely, I'm a big proponent of the hybrid model, both for work and for students, but we'll see what the new normal will be again next year.

Yeah, overwhelmingly, a lot of parents, I think to your point, they love the flexibility and convenience. And you can actually see the classes going on, too, which was a bit of a black box before. But yeah, I definitely think it'll be a balancing act to kind of create a program for every student that marries together that in-person interaction as well as the online piece.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:16] Yeah, absolutely. We definitely see the same thing and I really love the way you put the creating versus consuming. And I think that that's brilliant in the sense of the messaging as it relates both to parents, to teachers, to communities, and ultimately, to students to have a better understanding of what this experience is going to be like. And that's definitely the experience we want folks to have. I love that very much. That's awesome.

I always like to, as we sort of wrap the conversation, sort of talk about some of the pieces that folks are maybe struggling with. And one of the programs that Juni Learning does that we didn't really get into much, but is one that I'm intrigued by, because it's one that we advocate for, is your hackathons. And so, I want to just really briefly sort of touch base on sort of what you do with hackathons, and is that something that you do in that one-on-one setting or how do you make that more broadly accessible? What exactly does that look like for Juni Learning?

Vivian Shen: [00:25:19] That's a great question. So, our hackathons are incredible, because you don't actually need to be a Juni student to participate in the hackathon, so they're a competition where we've done so many different types of prompts. Like at the beginning of COVID, we did do a healthcare-focused one. But then, we've done like Halloween, everything in between.

And it's an opportunity for kids to be really creative, actually, to tie in some of the other things that we've been talking about, package together, give a presentation, really flex multiple different types of skills when they're entering these hackathons as well. I think one of the things that we're trying to get a little bit better on is that it does require a little bit of knowledge of coding to enter the hackathon, because you need to build a project.

But we have, yeah, all different skill level tiers for folks to do. And I think the most incredible part of the hackathon is that it really serves as a culmination for a lot of students to put everything together that they've learned, and also take a step back, and say, oh, my gosh, I made all of this and it's something that I'm really proud of that I can show off.

And we do pick some of the stellar projects for prizes, but everybody who participates in the hackathon, it's so rewarding for them and for their parents as well to kind of see what they've been working on. So, that's really what we encourage with the hackathon, is just ideally for every students to feel proud of what they've done and

kind of give them that break point, where they can say, I'm going to sit back, and look at what I've done, package it up, present it to the world, and hopefully build that confidence that we were talking about as well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:59] Yeah. Well, what I love about hackathon and the reason that we advocate for it so much is that I think that it provides for lots of kids that context for the things they've been learning along the way, of coding, computer science, whatever it happens to be, as a moment to say, I can take all of these things that I've learned and I'll apply them to something in a meaningful way. I can actually demonstrate to myself into the world that I can do something with this sets of skills I've been acquiring.

And oftentimes, when I've been in a lot of the sort of big in-person hackathons or whatnot that are going on, we do them at the Innovation Lab sometimes. It's just walking around. And that's a lot of the chatter that I hear from the kids. oh, I didn't know if I was ever going to use this, things like that. And so, the context is super meaningful for kids, because they can solve any problem we toss at them if they have the tools and the context to understand how to get there.

Vivian Shen: [00:27:49] 100%. It's so much about connecting the dots for them, because I think when you're young, you're just like, oh, why am I forced to do all these things, or Why am I learning this weird thing in math? But when you look back and you can connect all those things together, it gives you more confidence, but also a reason to keep going, because you figure out that, eventually, you'll always be connecting the dots back. And I think that's something that comes with wisdom and age that you find. But if you can teach kids that, too, then they kind of get that head start, too. Yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head, that's so rewarding for them and for us to see as well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:27] Yeah, it's a lot of fun. Everybody just have fun together. That's really wonderful. So, as we wrap up here, Vivian, what's next? What is on the horizon, not the big trade secrets, but what are you thinking about from the sort of bigger, broader sort of global perspective of education that you feel like is wickedly important to that Juni Learning and Vivian in particular has the skill set to take on? What are you thinking about?

Vivian Shen: [00:28:56] Yeah. I mean, I am always thinking about scale of impact. And so, I think scale, it's in every minute of every single interaction that we do in every class with an individual student, but it's also, how many students can we work with? How many times can we be the spark for them to say, oh, wow, I can do this or I can set down this path? And so, for me, it's about getting students across the world access to more and more incredible education experiences.

And really, we think about curating these experiences and the quality of them, because I think there's a lot of content out there, but there's almost too much, and so how can you make something where students feel like everything that they're getting is worthwhile, and that they're learning and they're building on this kind of repertoire that they can use for the rest of their lives?

And it's just such a big opportunity, especially in the US but around the world as well. And I think the last two years have really made it a focus area for a lot of people, parents, students, teachers, et cetera, so I'm just excited to see how the market changes and how we can scale our impact, too, because, yeah, there's a lot of folks out there who need it. So, yeah, we're excited.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:17] There are, and thank you so much for the work that you're doing, because it's really incredible. And I would encourage our listeners, please go and check out Juni Learning. We will provide, when the program is released, a set of links, so you can easily get there, just navigate your way there. But I do want to thank you, Vivian, not just for taking time today, but for the work that you're doing, because it's going to

be and it is meaningful, and that's exactly what we need as we collectively try to figure out what does teaching and learning look like in the sort of next iteration, because it's not what it was, and it's definitely not what it is right now. So, thank you.

Vivian Shen: [00:30:55] Yeah. No. And thank you for the work that you do as well and for having me on this podcast. I mean, it's incredible to see the work that everybody has been doing in the space. And just like we were saying before, the last two years, I think it just put it in the spotlight, but so many folks have been working on this space for many years. And so, it's very cool to see, yeah, how things are changing, and thank you again.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:17] Yeah, absolutely. It was great having you.

Vivian Shen: [00:31:20] Thanks.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:22] 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 @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.