



### 138. Understanding Our Archaeological Heritage with Dr. Alexandra Jones

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:00:00] I didn't want to hold an hour long or two-hour long teacher training, where you come in, I give you a lesson plan, we talk about it. I wanted to make it a venture. I wanted the teachers to get something out of it.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:00:11] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host. We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

So, on today's episode of Learning Unboxed, we have a special treat, because we get to go back to the profession that's near and dear to my heart, as all of our listeners know, we get to talk about archaeology today. In particular, we are going to be talking about Archaeology in the Community and the efforts that it takes to get meaningful programming, access, and opportunity into communities as it relates to archaeology and your local history.

And joining us today is Dr. Alexandra Jones, who is the Founder and Chief Executive Officer of Archaeology in the Community, and she's also an education leader focused on community outreach and service. She's been an educator in her community for more than 16 years, and she's taught across the spectrum in terms of the sort of educational environment from primary school, secondary, post-secondary, formal, informal museums, and communities. So, Alexandra, welcome to the program.

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:01:39] Thank you for having me. I'm excited.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:41] Yeah, we're going to have a fun conversation. It is one of those things, near and dear, when we get to talk about archaeology, especially how kids, in particular, can learn about their world through that. I get a lot of pushback all the time, because at PAST, work there is so much about STEM and our origin story is about archaeology, because in my mind, archaeology is the best example of STEM and STEM education you could possibly find. So, what do you think about that? We'll start with that.

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:02:08] I definitely concur. I think, oftentimes, when people think archaeology, they think only science, digging in the dirt, and we start to explain to people, it's so much more than that. Like it is the science, we start there, but then the technology, looking at all of the different types of technologies we utilize, then looking, historically, we study technologies of people in the past.

Engineering, you can't have homes, you can't have buildings, you can't have cities without the people that create it, so we study the formation of those. So, we include that as well. And math, at the base of everything we do, whether it is doing excavation pit and plotting it out or the formulas that we use within archaeology. So, STEM is very much part of archaeology, and it's at the forefront of it, and I just, oftentimes, think people don't make those connections.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:02:56] I think they don't. I think they get confused by the fact that archaeology is wrapped up so much in story, because it's the way we present it to the public, that they forget that it's actually a very meticulous endeavor, that it's so science-rich and it's rigorous, and there's so much data. I mean, the data alone, you and I could have that whole another conversation.

How much stuff do you come back from the field with? Well, it's epic, and sometimes, it takes years for us to get through it all, and that's okay, too. So, I want to spend today, though, largely talking about the organization that you created Archaeology in the Community, and I want you to sort of share with us the why. Why start the organization, but more importantly, at the heart of that, why was it so desperately needed?

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:03:40] So, I started the organization—well, we're about to be 14 in another month, 14 years ago. And it was a need that I saw. I was a graduate student at the time at Berkeley. One of the great things at the time when I got there was that they had outreach credits that all students had to do as part of their training. And I went out and visited a school, and did a project, and it just bothered me, weirdly, that the teacher said to all of us, I'll see you next semester.

And it wasn't the fact that we were coming back that bothered me. It was the fact that with such confidence, the teacher knew that archaeologists would be back in the classroom. And I knew I grew up in a region, in an area where that wasn't the case. Teachers don't have access to archaeologists. They don't know that if they come one semester, they'll come the next, and I just decided to fix that. I mean, I wanted that for where I grew up as much as for everybody else.

And so, I just talked with my advisor and said that I wouldn't do my outreach anymore in California, I would only do it in DC. And for me, it just kind of made sense. I'm a child of a parent who was a curator at the Smithsonian, and to grow up in the shadow of the Smithsonian and know that we didn't have access like that to archaeology, I just kind of made it a battle to change it. And from that, kind of snowballed and blossomed into what became a nonprofit, with our main focus initially being youth education in the DC kind of Metropolitan area.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:05:18] Yeah. And that's an absolutely amazing endeavor. And having started a nonprofit, I just want to make sure that everybody understands, that is not a small undertaking. There are passion projects, you do it out of your heart, it takes years, literally. For most, I mean, there are a few out there that are super, super lucky. In archaeology, it's kind of tough to kind of get a toehold and to start to rally and actually get the funds so that it can become your primary work, not a passion project on the side, because you've got to pay the bills and do the work. It's not easy. And so, the fact that you knew it wasn't easy, I have no doubt you knew, you had been in and around archaeology long enough at that point, and especially having grown up with a parent in the Smithsonian, you also understood how hard it is to get historical endeavors funded no matter what, right?

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:06:13] Yeah. Yes and no. I would say I think I was the starry-eyed, I'm going to save the world graduate student, because I was still in graduate school when it started. So, I would say part of it was that, oh, if I build it, they will come kind of a moment that I had, and they did. I just never really imagined or envisioned it would be as hard. And I think as most, kind of stepping away for a second, as a nonprofit, you also forget it's a business, sometimes, and most struggles that entrepreneurs have and the moments of questioning, is this worth it, and should I keep going, and one hug at a time.

And I think for any educator, you kind of understand what that means, but it would literally be the hugs that I got from my students and the appreciation that they showed for learning about archaeology or telling me that they would want to become an archaeologist made it worth it. And that's kind of the pay, and it's how I kind of kept going, is it would take one hug for me to be like, oh, I could keep doing this, at the same moment that I'd be like, this is crazy, what am I doing?

But we are here and we're thriving. And it's kind of funny because I think I still kind of tell my staff, like it's the gleam, it's that little spark that you see in the students' eyes that actually pay for what we do, and keep us going, and keep us motivated. So, if you see that spark and you see that lightbulb go off, you'll know what you're doing is the thing that you should be doing, and I think that's why I'm still here. That's why we're still here. It is a passion, not just a job.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:07:55] Yeah, absolutely. But it's a tough space, because I agree with you 100%, I mean, I remember those first few years at PAST, and I remember the years of doing that while also being a university professor and all of those different sort of pieces. And you're still in that space as well, and then eventually, the joyous moment comes where you get to the, or at least for me, where the transition can be made that being a university professor was the secondary role, right?

But it took a lot of time, energy, and effort. And I also agree with you that folks, I think, oftentimes misunderstand the whole nonprofit, especially those of us in the midst of running them, because I tell my staff all the time, not for profit doesn't mean not for money, because you all want a paycheck, right? So, we have to, at some point, be able to also recognize the endeavor in the work from that sort of entrepreneurship lens, that

business and industry lens, and then the opportunity that all of that affords us to deliver high-quality programming back into the community.

So, I applaud you for that because that's a really hard thing to learn, especially for lots of folks involved in nonprofit or startup who are not trained in business. I mean, I can't speak for you, but certainly for me, I mean, I had to figure out what a lot of the business lingo was just to even be able in the early years to figure out what I was supposed to be doing, right?

So, that's a tough thing to do. I want to also sort of dig in a little bit then on the programming itself, Alexandra, and I want to get into the weeds, if you will, of the kinds of programming that you do and how it actually intersects in an educational environment, whether it's informal or formal, does it make any difference? So, share with us a little bit about sort of the dream or the passion for the programming itself.

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:09:47] So, I very much wanted a sustainable archaeology project. And for those who aren't archaeologists, sustainable archaeology is like a theoretical perspective about how you approach archaeology, looking at four kind of subsections, social, cultural, economic, and environmental, so ecological. And as I developed programming, my first thing was I want students to grow up understanding archaeology, knowing what it was, knowing what it does, and how it's important to us as a community, and as a nation, and as global citizens, but what I also realized was—and most people don't know, my background actually is in education.

So, I was a substitute teacher for a while, ended up with my own sixth grade for a year, and then kind of went from there into graduate school. I also understood the lack of resources and support for the everyday classroom teacher. And as much as our administrations, our education system tries, there's a disconnect oftentimes. And so, what I didn't want to do is be that person who created more material that put more of a burden on classroom teachers.

So, as somebody who'd been there, I thought, well, I need to create a program where I come in for teachers. I'm not asking you to learn archaeology. I'm not asking you to go to teacher training, and memorize a whole new lesson plan, and figure out how to incorporate it, I want to do that work for you. So, when we initially started out, it was free

programming where we would come in and we basically pitched it to the teachers, this is a 45-minute period where you can just sit in the back. You don't have to do anything.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:11:29] Do something else.

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:11:31] Right. I'm a master at classroom management, so I know how to wrangle the kiddies, go enjoy yourself for like 45 minutes. And if you want to listen in, you can, do whatever. But this is how we kind of started out, and very grassroots. I market it to just teachers, not to the administration, not to the schools, and just that it's free. What then start to happen is there were a lot of teachers who got really excited about it, who really love the program, loved what they saw the opportunities were, so we partnered with one teacher in particular in DC and created a week-long program.

And essentially for a week, it's 45 minutes every day. She loved it, but she would sit in the back, and grade papers, and do something else, but we took over, and it was kind of the science period for the students, and we ended up having, on a Saturday, a mock excavation. So, we brought them in. We asked parents to volunteer. We had a grill there. Parents were grilling, and barbecuing hotdogs and hamburgers. The students were excavating.

At the end of it, the following week, we came back and they created a small site report. And so, it was two-prong in our approach. One, we recognize that students love, if they really love something, then they're going to go home and tell their parents. And so, parents, when they showed up on Saturday, were already kind of curious, but then they got to watch the excavation happen. And as parents, they would come over and ask questions themselves.

So, it was a way to actually fill a gap of intergenerational and bringing two different generations into archaeology, one, through the delight of the parents saying, their kids being so excited about doing this, two, the children feeling like they could actually share something with their parents as well. And then, the scientific side. So, we have all the fun. Oftentimes, as archaeologists, we say these are mock pits, these are pits, but we don't let them do the rigor. So, it was the fact that they had to pull it all together, synthesize it, and do that work of writing a report.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:13:32] I love that piece, by the way, because that's fabulous, right? And you're right. That is the thing in all kinds of whether it's archaeology, or biology, or whatever. Oftentimes, kids go have a great experience, but they have no idea then of what the back side of that is, and that's masterful.

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:13:47] Yeah. So, it was awesome to kind of do that, but also to get them to think interpretatively about the different layers, and the artifacts they found, and what's taking place, and can we find dates? So, they did all of that for their reports. From that project, we just kept growing. I mean, once people saw it, once we started advertising, and it was the fact that it was free. And that was something that has always been near and dear to my heart, is that all of the youth programs are absolutely 100% free.

If you want it, we'll come. But what I then started to notice was there was a professional development demand. As archaeology is growing and flourishing, what you're seeing is that there are a lot of college students, professional archaeologists who have no experience in the classroom. And what I started to get was interesting conversations from colleagues about how they just took their students, and then their students bummed, and kids were bored, or the kids were like running amuck.

And I would laugh, because I would be like, see, you have no classroom management skills, did you pay attention to how the teacher called the students together? What were the signals? Was that a hand raised? Was it a one, two, three? So, things that we learned, I think as educational specialists, having done that, they have no clue. And then, terminology, something as simple as language. They were speaking so far over the children's heads that the children can't grasp the concept.

So, I started training profession, young career professionals, graduate students, how to do this work, so you could come in, have an internship, you'll actually help create lesson plans, so you understand what educators go through. You will run the class, and I'll be in the back, and if I see that, oh, the language is going too far left or everybody's not paying attention, I would kind of help, and coach, and bring that back while still keeping the burden off of the classroom teacher themselves so that they could kind of enjoy that freedom.

And oftentimes, what I recognize was they were just as excited and we're actually learning things right along with the students. And interestingly enough, that became the new project that we put forth. And looking at what was offered currently to classroom teachers, again, I always go back to myself, I was just like, I didn't want to hold an hour long or two-hour long teacher training where you come in, I give you a lesson plan, we talk about it.

I wanted to make it a venture. I wanted the teachers to get something out of it. And so, about six years ago, we partnered with Montpelier, and we created our signature teacher training, and we mashed together something that they had been doing and the teacher training. And what we did was we created what we call the teacher excavation kind of dig, learn, and serve. And the teachers come out to Montpelier. We, AITC, was able to secure scholarships, so it was completely free for teachers.

So, for one week, they came essentially on a mini-vacation to Montpelier. They excavated in the morning, worked in the lab, had tours, personalized tours all throughout the property each day. And then, we would come in, and I would give lesson plans, but it would be skeleton lesson plans, and I would sit with them, and say, let's look at your region, let's look at what you're teaching, let me help you apply this to what you're doing, so that you're not doing this heavy lift when you go back. We've already created stuff. We've already created partnerships. Let me give you a couple of things that I've done myself. Let's think about how we can incorporate.

So, spending that time with them, and then getting intimately ingrained with archaeology, us creating videos together, so they can send pictures back to their students and show their students that they, too, were archaeologists for a little bit, really transformed the project, but it also increased our capacity. And my biggest thing was that if every summer, I teach 15 students—I mean, 15, excuse me, teachers, and every year, those 15 teachers are going out and teaching 100 to 120, depending on the setup of their school, students, the impact of archaeology is growing exponentially fast and way more than just me going into the classroom.

And these were teachers who were willing to kind of do that work, or had that time, or were able to develop what they wanted to do in that week long, and then they also

came out with 40 continuing education credits. So, it was like, I also just saved them time during the school year where they didn't have to go out and do or attend things on Saturdays. They're now freed up because of this program, and they didn't spend anything, because it was completely paid for, for them to do it.

So, I'm constantly trying to think of ways where I make life easier on teachers while helping them do this, while passing along the message of archaeology and really imparting how important this is to the study of social sciences, literature, math, and just kind of the everyday core of everything that we teach. Our teachers even find it, we talk about art and archaeology, and how you can incorporate that as well. So, I just don't oftentimes think people think archaeology is exciting or kind of affords as many opportunities as it does for teaching and getting kids to like really get excited about different subjects.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:19:28] Absolutely. You could teach anything through archaeology. You and I are biased, but that's okay. But I do believe passionately in that and I love the fact that you found a way to bring the teachers in. We do that frequently, too. We refer to that as Immersive PD, recognizing the same sorts of things, right? Teachers are tired, right? Teachers are tired on so many different levels and just one more PD to learn just this thing or just an extra thing I need to do, and so we spend a lot of time at PAST, whether it's an archaeology, or it's botany, or it's physics, it doesn't make any difference to us either, robots.

We do a lot of stuff with robots at PAST. And the reality of it is if we can find a meaningful way to share the joy of whatever that science, that topic is by immersing educators in the experience of how they could then apply that through their own lens and their own experience, into their own classroom with their own kids, because they know that community better than we will ever be able to know that particular community. That's magic. And to your point earlier, that's when you see the aha, the light bulb, the passion. For me, I always know that something's an incredible win, when our educators come back, it doesn't matter what program we're offering, they're the first to sign up.

I mean, honestly, sometimes, one of those great joys, as you pointed out, is a week, we can offer a program about archaeology, and the next week, we could offer one about bugs, and the following week, we could offer one about Lean Six, and manufacturing

processes. And if you have a teacher that it doesn't matter what experience you're providing to them, they'll say, "I want to do that thing, because I'm going to learn something, and whether I ever use it in my classroom or not, I'm going to step away with this knowledge base I can share with my kids and a mechanism to be able to apply it".

And I think that the other thing that I love about the work that Archaeology in the Community is doing and your work in particular is that you're trying to tap into those passions. I know you didn't necessarily use that phrase in our conversation yet today, but it's it's written all over you, that if you can inspire a kid, whether they become an archaeologist or not, but you just inspire them to want to learn more and to engage in their own education, we have changed the world.

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:21:41] And I often tell people I don't have a "superpower", but the only power I do have is archaeology. And I use that in every facet of my life to try and change the world in whatever capacity that I can do. And so, we, with ATC, have even found other ways of helping, and getting the larger community involved in archaeology, and teaching them about the importance of that as well.

And I think that's what makes it so amazing, is we start with just the small vision of changing kids, and like in children and like helping them out. And then, we kind of just kept going because we see that there's so much more. You start with the youngest generation, but you want to get the next generation, and how do you get the other generation? And how do we all start to learn together collaboratively, and change like how we operate and how we see the world?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:22:37] I love that very much, and I always also love the fact that the mechanism by which you're able to get the community to engage with you in that process, so those Saturday excavations, parents coming in. And you're absolutely right. I mean, I can't tell you how many times I've received that phone call from a parent, or my favorite one is when I get the phone call from a school principal, "What on earth are you guys doing to our kids?" Right?

"Because parents are calling me, and they're saying, 'Oh, my God, that was wonderful. My kid just spent an hour telling me about everything that they did today, when most of the time when you ask them how's school, all I get is fine'" But instead, the kid is just

yakking at you a mile a minute, you're like, "What? What's happening here?" And the answer is you're engaging those kids. That's what's happening. Doesn't matter what the topic is.

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:23:28] And I think that's important. One of our kind of newer projects, we kind of come out of the school and we have an archaeology club. And we've been able to secure a grant for it for the past five years. And the grant has allowed us, again, to make it 100% free, which is always like the important part. So, for me, we bring them in on Sundays, they come in, they have an hour-and-a-half. We bring in archaeologists, literally, internationally.

We've had the ability to take them on virtual tours of Harvard museums. We've taken them to the Nat Geo Museum. And the interesting part about our field trips is we bring the parents. So, every time we have a field trip, I secure tickets for the parents and there are always these nice exclusive moments. We went to Mt. Vernon and they allowed us to excavate with them. Parents were super excited. They get to engage.

And what ended up happening was social media. We were seeing tweets from parents. I had one parent who was super excited, like, "Going on my archaeology field trip today". And it just kind of tickled us that this is your child's field trip, but the parents started to relate to it so much, and then talking about, "Oh, my gosh, my daughter got to eat her homework tonight. Oh, her archaeology homework incorporated snacks and food."

So, it would be those sort of things where they would make these comments on Twitter, and then like tag us in it so that we could see that they were just equally as excited about it. And we're posting on their Instagram accounts and everything else the things that they were doing with their kids and activities, and that became truly transformative to just seeing the impact that we were having, but the sheer joy that the parents were also experiencing as a result of the programs we were creating for their children.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:25:25] Yeah, absolutely. And that's where all the magic happens, is when you get that very, very inclusive community that's engaged in whatever the project you happen to be doing. For me, that's where I find the greatest depth of meaning and I think long-term impact. And again, the thing that I've certainly seen and I

assume that you've seen as well is there are so many repeat customers, if you would, right? Because they're engaged and they love it so much, so like watching and monitoring.

And it's really funny because—and I hadn't really put it a lot sort of into context, but several years ago, I sort of used this crazy benchmark, how do you know when you've arrived in this whole nonprofit crazy world? It is way beyond just the sustainability from the financial side that is such an epic lift. But for me, it was when January 1 rolled around and parents were calling starting on January 2nd, when everybody's back in the office or whatever that date happens to be, and they're like, "Okay, have you opened the summer programming yet? Can we register?"

Like we don't even release that until the end of the month at the earliest, which we moved up, because we used to be, "Oh, April is good enough". No, no, no, no, no, no, parents have fully figured out where, what's going to happen with their kiddos, and it's the same folks over, and over, and over again, and the same kid not coming to one program in the summer, but coming for five or six weeks of programming in the summer. It's like, okay, now, we found that sweet spot, where it really, really appeals, too, to all the stakeholders.

I always like to close the program and the conversation, Alexandra, with recognizing that people listen to this program from all over the world, and they're sitting here, and they're listening to you tell this amazing story of these awesome opportunities, but we don't have Alexandra Jones in our community. So, how can we find or create these opportunities for ourselves? Can we get access to archaeology in the community from afar or how would we go about taking what we heard today and applying it to our own children's experiences?

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:27:37] So, even though AITC was started as a regional organization, we have expanded internationally. We've done programs in Belize with the Institute of Archaeology there. We've also done work in Haiti. And so, we've kind of expanded. And I do one-off programs. So, I often say, just because you're somewhere else, it doesn't really matter to me where in the world you're at, if you're interested in a program where we can help, we do.

The other thing is we've started to expand, because of COVID, our virtual offerings. So, we have a new set of lesson plans that will be going up in March, with videos included. So, again, always thinking about not requiring teachers to have to do everything. So, we're expanding our digital offerings that line up with lesson plans, so the teacher can just play a video versus having to learn all new material.

So, our virtual offerings are going up, but we also have virtual field school. And so, our archaeology club, which traditionally has been in-person, went virtual two years ago and we had international students attending it. So, I do say for my parents, for my teachers, if there is something that you're interested in, it's something that you would like to participate in, please visit our website, which is [www.archaeologyincommunity.com](http://www.archaeologyincommunity.com) and look for our offerings, but email me, and I'm always willing to collaborate or to brainstorm, to help facilitate and think through a project.

I talk with a number of teachers and email with them all the time about how to incorporate based on what subjects. And then, the other thing is that I have international connections with archaeologists, so if I personally can't help you, I am very sure that I can refer you to or listening to someone who can assist and be of help in your region or part of the world.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:29:29] Yeah, absolutely. And when we release this episode, we will post all the links and materials with the episode. So, please, I hope that any of you that are interested will take a look at those links. You will download the information. And if you still have questions, desires, or wants, that you will reach out to Alexandra, so she can help bring archaeology into your community and archaeology into your classroom, and inspire the next generation of folks that are being mindful of the world, no matter what career they go into.

That's one of the things, and I think that was one of the reasons for us why we—you always launch with what you know, and of course, as an archaeologist, that's where I'm going to lead, but I very, very quickly found that it became this great opportunity, because everybody loves it. Even if they don't know they love it, the reality is it becomes this mechanism, the synergy by which you could have incredible conversations. And at the end of the day, stewards for the work that we do. So, thank you so much for joining

us today, Alexandra, and thank you for the incredible work that you're doing. It's so desperately needed and it's joyous.

**Dr. Alexandra Jones:** [00:30:42] Well, thank you for this opportunity. I've been very excited to talk with PAST about this, so thank you.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:30:48] Absolutely. Thank you so much.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:30:51] 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.