



150. Take Location-Based Learning Into Your Own Hands with Anne-Marie Gilliland

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:00:00] The Smithsonian, in fact, is not just one building. It's more buildings than I even know. But, like I said, it's 21 museums. So, people come with the idea that they can visit the whole Smithsonian in one day, and not really possible. But these Adventure Labs do at least give people the option where they can get a little bit of a broader experience in one day.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:24] 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. We are going to go on a grand adventure, actually, today, because we're going to be talking about how you take places, some awesome, some old, some unique, some funky, some a little bit of all of that, and you make them accessible to the public. And we're going to do that by talking about and visiting the Smithsonian Adventure Labs.

And joining us to share about what the Smithsonian Adventure Labs are all about is Anne-Marie Gilliland, who has been the Smithsonian for ten years, first as a volunteer, and now managing volunteer at the Smithsonian Castle. And so, the Smithsonian Castle is where all the secret sauce is. So, welcome to the program, Anne-Marie.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:01:42] Thank you, Annalies, for inviting me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:43] Yeah. We are very excited to sort of hear about what you have going on. So, first and foremost, for our listeners who might not be familiar, the Smithsonian is not just a place, so share sort of the 100,000 foot view about what on earth is this thing we call the Smithsonian in the United States and why do we love it so much.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:02:02] That's such a good question. Having grown up around it, I didn't have a full appreciation for it until I started working here. And even then, after ten years, I'm continually learning new stuff as you can imagine.

But the Smithsonian was founded in 1846, so it's celebrating its 175th birthday. And it comes from the will of a British Scientist named James Smithson, who never stepped foot in the United States, and willed his money to

us saying, "To fund in Washington, D.C. an institution called the Smithsonian for the increase and diffusion of knowledge." And that was kind of both very specific and very vague.

And the first thing that comes from that is The Castle, which I'm currently sitting in. And all of the Smithsonian all at once when it first opened its doors, it's got an art gallery, it has a museum, it has a lot of research going on. If you remember, like, in mid-1800s, that's when we're starting to sort of push past the Mississippi a little bit more and exploring this territory with scientists that haven't been out there before and learning a whole lot about a world that, from a European perspective, hadn't seen before. So, that's where the Smithsonian sort of starts.

And pretty much right away, it outgrows this building and it has now become 21 museums, almost nine research centers, the National Zoo is part of the Smithsonian, we have tons of affiliations across the world. So, it's the largest museum and research complex in the world.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:59] It is and it's epic. And definitely anybody that gets a chance to travel there and go see, you can spend days and days and days going from one building to the next, seeing all the amazing things that are archived and housed there. So, we certainly are appreciative of that odd and vaguely broad but specific gift so many years ago. So, that's very exciting.

So, let's dive into a little bit to the work that you're specifically doing. Because the conversation today is really about the Adventure Labs that are based on the original building you talked about, The Castle. So, what is this concept of Adventure Labs? What do you mean by that?

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:04:39] So, Adventure Lab is an app that was created more recently by the same people who put out Geocaching, which is an app that's been out for over 20 years very successfully. And unlike Geocaching, where sort of you're finding one little container, you're going off an adventure to find it, and maybe learning a little bit about that one spot or not, it's really up to whoever creates it, with Adventure Lab, it's a series of up to ten locations that you're going to. Not all the ones that we've made are ten. But you go up to ten and you can then create a narrative with that grouping of ten or less, instead of these one offs.

And the other sort of really nice thing about Adventure Lab is, unlike the traditional Geocaching where you're looking for an object to then unlock and sign in to the logbook, it's touchless. It's only on your app on your phone and mobile device that you're touching. And so, to unlock each location, there's a clue that's given. It could be something as simple as what's the color of the mailbox to the right of the building, and then they type the word blue or whatever.

Or in the case of the ones we've been doing, we've really been trying to tie them to the locations and the buildings that people are standing in front of. So, we're getting them to do a little bit more close looking at the details of the Smithsonian that people sort of they get kind of lost, perhaps, in somebody's trip to the Smithsonian. Because it's more about seeing the objects inside of the buildings rather than learning about the Smithsonian itself. And that's what we're really doing with these Adventure Labs.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:39] So, tell me a little bit just to sort of help our listeners fully understand, so is the intent of this is that you're going to use this app while you're at the Smithsonian (A)? And maybe they answer is multiple, right? Or is this something that I'm never going to make it to the Smithsonian, but this becomes a way for me to experience the Smithsonian, or something kind of in between. So, help our listeners understand, what was the intent for the use component of this, I guess the use case scenario.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:07:09] Yeah. So, they are meant to be done onsite. Because like Geocaching, it's about exploring the world that you're in. So, they are location specific. You're using geolocation to guide yourself around to the different spots that we've pinpointed. So, it does require being here. Unfortunately, for the people that can't make it here.

So, what it does do is it opens up the Smithsonian sort of more to the outside world. You don't have to go into each building to experience a little bit about them. Perhaps, you only have time to visit one of the museums. But on your way there, you're walking past a couple of the other stops in one of these adventures. And so, you can sort of start to have a more holistic view of the Smithsonian, that bird's eye view that you were talking about, where you're getting the idea that it's not just one building, one place. This is a common sort of idea that's out there.

Night at the Museum, that definitely helps sort of weave that into popular culture that the Smithsonian, in fact, is not just one building. It's more buildings than I even know. But, like I said, it's 21 museums. So, people come with the idea that they can visit the whole Smithsonian in one day, and not really possible. But these Adventure Labs do at least give people the option where they can get a little bit of a broader experience in one day.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:40] Right. And so then, I guess, my other question is, (A) I love the notion that you've taken something that would traditionally have either been sort of a self-unlocking to the museum or traditional tour experience. And you're saying, "Hey, we can create an alternative experience for folks that are looking for something a little bit different." And it definitely, I think, would appeal to a wide variety of people who, just for whatever reason, the traditional tour is not my thing or I would really love to have some insight in addition to just my own individual walking around.

But the Adventure Lab, is it exclusive to the Smithsonian? Is this app only used in this sort of setting? Or is it more generalized than that? Because I'm sure folks are wondering, "Hey, that's kind of cool. Could we use Adventure Lab in my community for a downtown historic district tour?" So, I'm just trying to think about the way people might approach the technology component.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:09:40] Yeah. Absolutely. Like, Geocaching, it is [inaudible]. So, anywhere you can Geocache, you can do Adventure Lab. And the way I learned about it was, I was at a conference and park - I think a state park was using it. Because Geocaching has sort of more practical use outside than inside - so it works really well with outdoor spaces, which all of these are outdoors. They could be indoors but they're outdoors.

And, you know, I live outside of Annapolis and there is an Adventure Lab in Annapolis, that I didn't make, but I did it, and it's about the signers of the Declaration of Independence because a bunch of them lived in Annapolis. And it's nowhere near the whole ten stops, I don't think. I could be wrong. But I think it's a smaller one. So, you can do whatever you want with it, really. They've marketed it so you could do it as a food tour, sort of just whatever topic you want to do with a group of stops about. It's a lot of fun.

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:53] Yeah. No, it's super, super interesting. And I dug into it a little bit before our conversation to have some context for it. And I was like, "Oh, my gosh. I can imagine so many amazing uses for it." So, I do want to dig in just a little bit because one of the things that I thought was super interesting - this is sort of where I think that our listeners, many of whom are school teachers in a variety of communities around the world, but also communities and things like that - I could absolutely see somebody saying, "Okay. I can't really go to this specific Smithsonian Adventure Lab because I'm not there."

Although, lots and lots of school groups do come, so I would hope that they would hear this and say, "Oh, my gosh. The next time we go to Washington, because we don't have time, in the two or three days that we're there." And I know Washington gets fully inundated with the middle school D.C. tour. But this would be an amazing way, quite frankly, for those tour groups to have an added benefit, back to your point, we can't get through everything but you're walking by, there's lots of activities that are happening.

But the thing that I want to dig in is that you said "I made," so I want to talk a little bit because The Castle experiences, you, in fact, built and designed this using the app and the technology. So, share with our listeners a little bit about what that's like. Because I could imagine the teacher saying, "Hey, I can do this. We can do this in our local park. I can have my kids actually build this thing and learn along the way." And their end product as they created this thing that other parents or other kids can come and actually do and use. And I think that's a true value of what you've developed here. So, share with our listeners your experience on the design and development of these two Castle experiences that I see that you posted online.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:12:32] Yeah. Actually, that's sort of in some ways the more rewarding part of it for me, because it's more personal for me than when it gets released out into the wild. Which is, my job prior to the shutdown of the world two years ago was to manage the docents and the other volunteers that are on the floor of The Castle. And the docents in The Castle give a chore talking about the history of the Smithsonian, and The Castle itself, and James Smithson. And I wanted to find a way to continue to work with them not knowing how long everything was going to go on.

And it was a virtual conference I went to. So, I went to this virtual conference, I found out about this app. And I was just like, "Oh, my goodness. This is a great opportunity." And was able to reach out to some of those docents and other volunteers that I worked with. And for the last two years, we've just been a working group. And so, really early on, I had list of ideas that I thought would work really well. And with them, we sort of started to discuss which ones they thought would work well, what stories we all really felt passionate about being able to tell.

And we're also, with this, able to tell stories we don't normally tell on the standard tour that we give. Because you have to streamline it to fit that 30 to 45 minutes that people are going to be walking around with you in the building. And so, there's lots of nooks and crannies in the Smithsonian Castle history that just don't fit in that narrative.

So, we've been working via Zoom, meeting about every two weeks for sometimes two hours to really workshop through stuff. And so, we'll come up with, for example, the two Castle ones. I knew that I wanted to do one that was sort of like a ghost tour. We had done ghost tours the Halloween right before the shutdown, and they're popular. Because there is some slightly darker history to The Castle, and I was like, "This is content that people, especially I know as a person who loves that kind of content, are going to enjoy year-round."

Like, when I go to a city, I look for ghost tours in that city. And it's a really popular industry. So, it's something that it's not necessarily a ghost tour, but it is sort of that quirkier sort of narrative, again, that don't normally fit in the tour. And so, that was a topic I threw out day one. I was like, "This is one that I would really like to do." But left it up to sort of democratic decision.

And we worked on other ones before we made it to that one. And, finally, I was like, "Okay. Which should we work on next?" We did one on the architecture of the Smithsonian. And one of the volunteers was like, "Well, Anne-Marie, now this the time to do the one that you really want to do." So, we started to just brainstorm all the stories that would fit into that. And the volunteers that I worked with, it's, like, six to ten of them, depending,

they come in and out, they would then be like, "Okay. Of this list, who wants to start to research this topic?" And they would go off and research.

And the fun challenge, if you will, of Adventure Lab, is you only are allowed this small paragraph of text. So, again, you're having to really edit what you're saying. And they would come back with that. And as a group, we would go through what everybody had written. And find the right images we wanted to use. There's so many great historic images in the Smithsonian archives of our history that we don't often share or we don't really share a lot of context sometimes. So, this was allowing us to share images and stories, and string them together in a way that sort of as a whole made them all more coherent and more memorable.

And the process has been great. Like, getting to work with those volunteers that I wouldn't have had a reason to work with for the last two years. And the flip side of this is coming out on the other side where we're getting to the point we're going to have them back out on the floor. They're, like, doctorate level volunteers in terms of the content that they now know and can share.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:17] Yeah. I think that's one of the amazing things about the opportunity of using Adventure Lab. And I can see that that is a context piece that many folks would really see as beneficial. The fact that your staff of volunteers, they know more than they knew. Their tours will never be the same that they give, because they've got this sort of background sort of stuff swirling around in their brain.

So, even as they're given their standard tour, whatever that may happen to be - because I've been on many Smithsonian tours and no tour are alike because the individual giving the tour takes a slightly different sort of slant or interest in the pieces that are going - I can imagine that that would be really impactful to the way the volunteers are even approaching their work and their own experience.

And the fact that so much learning came out of producing that product - I guess that's my message to teachers, if you are listening this - the learning that happens in the space of having to pull all the resources together and to weave the story, I think that's the other thing, because certainly it's indicated online, but even the materials that you sent over prior to the interview, just talking about this notion of story, it's really powerful.

And so, I guess one of the other things that I'm really, really curious about is, as you were doing all this brainstorming, I would guess, you, as a group, came up with many, many more adventures.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:18:42] Oh, yeah. Yeah. So, we have five that are live. One more is on the way. Well, two more. But one will be out pretty quickly. And this group where I given the resources, we could just keep going, because it's 175 years of history of the Smithsonian, which is quite a significant amount. And being right here in Washington, D.C., Smithsonian history parallels and is involved in our national, and even international, history in a way that is kind of surprising, quite honestly. Because you just sort of think of it as like a repository. But it also is, like, an active player sometimes, not always by choice, but by merit of being in the middle of the city.

So, yeah, there could be so many more.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:40] Right. So, one of the things that I can imagine that folks are thinking about as they're listening is also, granted you created Adventure Lab with ten stops for most of the ones that you're trying to work on, so once you actually decided on your topic and you're doing all the research pieces - and I realized that that's sort of a variable question in terms of how long does that take - when you actually start using the app to do the build, how long does that take? What's the complexity of that? Because that's one of the other things that people are going to really wonder, I love the idea but is this just so overwhelming? Are

there resources to understand how to do it and do it effectively and to be able to translate that? So, tell us a little bit about that piece of experience, the actual building once all the decisions have been made.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:19:40] Oh, goodness.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:34] You had to know we were going to go there, right?

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:20:36] Yeah. So, honestly, the research piece is the piece that takes the longest. So, the more that you know upfront, the faster it's going to go. The other piece that just took us long is, because we've gone through the process most of six times, it's a lot faster now. Because I now know how to manage it. The volunteers I'm working with are the same ones I've been working with for the last two years. So, they're ready for -

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:02] It's a rocking team at this point.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:21:01] At this point it is, yeah. You know, you're not going to get that quite the same way. But in terms of building it, so once the research is done and then the writing and the editing, it's not hard because it's just like a form on the website, basically, that you dump your content into, upload the images into. And then, the next really big step, which isn't necessarily that big, is figuring out what the questions are going to be and where to pin each one, which is part of our discussion going into this.

So, like for the one we just finished, which hasn't gone live yet, is women's history at the Smithsonian, focusing on women who worked at the Smithsonian. Again, our story isn't one that necessarily gets told the same way because we're so busy telling the stories of the objects that we're curating. But our stories are also really interesting. So, with that, we have this whole list of women and we're figuring out using the National Mall, which is where most of the Smithsonian museums happen to be.

Like, we have a really great list of women that we're affiliated with natural history, but we wanted to spread things out a little bit more. So, we ended up finding Smithsonian also has its own archives division that focuses on archiving Smithsonian staff. Reaching out to them and to the Smithsonian historian and sort of be like, "Okay. We're stuck. We need a little bit more variety for this." And they were able to come up with some people that we then looked out and we're like, "Okay. So, this is filling in topically something that we haven't touched on before." For that one, we have our first stop outside of the Postal Museum, which is not exactly on the National Mall, but it's up by the Capitol.

And so, that was part of our discussion the whole time as we were curating the topics. It's like, "Okay. If we choose this topic, where would it go?" And is that topic in, not conflict, but is it sort of too close geographically, even, to this other topic. And which one is the one that we really want to tell in this story? So, all of those discussions were made before we even get into the point of putting it into the app itself.

And then, once we have it in the app itself and we're sort of finessing what the questions are, because this was done sort of in remote management style, myself and a couple of the other volunteers would come out on the mall and go location scouting, basically. And be like, "Okay. We know we want this stop at The Castle, what signs, what educational material can we point people to? Or is there some feature on the building that sort of ties in to what we're talking about?"

So, we really tried to make our questions, like I said, ones they're tied into that content. And if not to the content, at least got people to do a little bit more closer looking at their surroundings. You know, we have really great gardens that, also, are all over the National Mall. And so, we utilize them quite often. And one of the

really great things about Adventure Lab is people can leave feedback once they complete an adventure. And that was great, you know, being at home working for two years and not getting any sort of feedback from visitors. And you don't traditionally get forms filled out that regularly about tours or anything.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:53] But you get something. There's an interaction. There's a back and forth that takes place. And all the world missed that. We've heard a lot about that. So, I totally understand what you're point of view is.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:25:02] Yeah. So, we didn't have that. But then, once these were up and running, and the people that are kind enough to leave feedback were giving feedback, it's all been really positive and delightful and really rewarding for myself and the volunteers I've been working with to see the commentary that we're getting on that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:01] Yeah. No. Absolutely. I just really, really love every aspect of this. And I do hope that our listeners find their way to Washington and actually get to dig in and sort of play with the adventures you created. And I love the fact that you've got one that's coming out about women. That's fabulous. It's so desperately needed and wonderful.

So, you know, I always like to wrap the conversation by recognizing there are folks out there in the world that are listening to this and thinking, "This really applies. I can imagine this, not only can I go and visit this place -" and, hopefully folks will "- but I can bring what I just heard back into my own community."

And so, two things. First, one of the things that I know folks are going to be wondering, and granted it's easy enough to find information, but what is the cost? Not the cost to do design development, because there's a tremendous amount of overhead, if you will, from the Smithsonian perspective of the time and all those pieces. But is there cost to using the app to do the design work? Because I think that folks do want to know that.

And then, really, my final question to you is, you know, what advise do you have for folks that are out there contemplating taking on Adventure Lab for the very first time? I mean, you've learned so much and I'm sure there are multiple things, but if there were just one or two things that you would want folks to know before they get started, things to think about, what would those be?

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:26:44] Oh, goodness. Well, I'll take the easy one first, which is the cost. Which is, it does cost money. And I would reach out to Geocaching because then you have to sign a whole user agreement. And we're, ultimately, having seven of these right now. So, I think whatever price I got, I don't know what it would be.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:05] But there's a mechanism for folks to go with those information pieces.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:27:09] Yeah. And they've been very helpful. I will say, they've been really good to work with. They came early on and met virtually with volunteers I was working with to really help explain things to them. And they just are really supportive and really excited about what they do.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:27] That's awesome.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:27:27] So, I would definitely recommend working with them. And in terms of things people should know, I would say, first of all, that character limit in what you want to say, you have to really have a critical eye and be willing to part with information that deep in your heart you love. So, just hold that mental funeral for some of the things, and that's really hard.

I mean, the other thing that I didn't get a chance to mention is how much rewarding this teamwork was. Because these volunteers don't normally work as a team together. They work individually. So, they craft their own tour and go out and give their own tour to the public. And then, they never see that public again. So, this was a chance for them to work together as a community in a way that they normally don't. And really get to know each other. So, that's been great, especially through the last two years having some sort of community.

And, I'll say, the other thing is just sort of thinking about, for me, it was stuff that excited me and the volunteers. Luckily, we were pretty much on the same page. But stories that excite you, I always think if they excite you, the storyteller, they'll excite the person listening to your story. So, I wouldn't think too hard beyond that. That's sort of where the passion lies people will connect with.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:03] Absolutely. I love that. And I love the way this sort of crafted or approach this notion of sort of internal thinking about all the pieces that you love and how you have to distill that down. Because it is really hard to let go.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:29:03] It's very hard.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:22] Yeah. I totally understand that. So, Anne-Marie, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to share about the Smithsonian Adventure Lab and about the process that you went through and the amazing work that's happening at the Smithsonian, The Smithsonian Castle in particular. So, thank you, not just for the conversation, but for the work that you do. And we will encourage our listeners to make their way to Washington to actually try the app out in real time. But also for those that can't get there, maybe to give it a try on your own to make something in your own community. So, thank you so much.

Anne-Marie Gilliland: [00:29:22] Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:00] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guest 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.