

Learning Is a Social Event with Anya Kamenetz Transcript

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Chris Congdon: When the pandemic sent everyone home – many teachers and students struggled. And according to our guest today – one of the biggest reasons is because learning is a social event.

Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer, Rebecca Charbausk. If you like this podcast, we would appreciate it if you rate and review it – which helps others find it.

Rebecca Charbauski: Our guest today is Anya Kamenetz. Anya speaks, writes, and thinks about how children learn, grow and thrive on a changing planet. She covered education for many years including for NPR. Her newest book is *The Stolen Year: How Covid Changed Children's Lives, And Where We Go Now*. She also is raising two elementary school-age daughters.

CC: Stick around after we hear from Anya because Andrew Kim, who is a director of global research at Steelcase, will join us. Andrew will share why the physical environment makes such a difference to how we learn.

CC: Thanks for joining us at Work Better Anya. Your reporting on education over the years is really fascinating.

Anya Kamenetz: Thank you so much for having me.

CC: Particularly your work during the pandemic that led to your new book which is called "The Stolen Year: How Covid Changed Children's Lives and Where We Go Now," I think anybody who has a child or who knows a child is going to find your storytelling really poignant and I just like to hear why did you think it was important to write this particular book?

AK: Thank you! Yeah when the pandemic hit and school shut down all over the world. I was here in my home office in Brooklyn with my two daughters who were 3 and 8 years old at the time and with my vantage point as a national education reporter I really felt like I had a unique mandate to pay attention to what was happening to kids all over the country and I also had some background and experience. What I drew on right away was my experience reporting in New Orleans right after Katrina and then following up a decade later. New Orleans is my hometown and that was the biggest contemporary parallel that I could find to where a city closed their public school doors. Obviously there was so much else going on in the city at the time as there was with a pandemic but the school closures alone did have an impact that was measurable on kids and so that really was one of the things that made me realize okay, there's something really important happening here. There were so many journalists looking at so many different aspects of what was happening with the pandemic I felt like who's going to watch the kids? Who's going to pay attention to what's happening with the kids? So that really became my mandate.

CC: I feel like the experience that we've all had was very different depending on the community that we're in and depending on our individual situations, and the stories that you're telling really helped me to have a broader perspective on what other kids might have experienced because like in our community, we have a lot of professionals that live on my block and some parents were nurses or pharmacists and had to go into work. But a lot of parents were able to stay home. Their kids had great internet connections and all of those kinds of advantages but that clearly wasn't the case for a lot of the kids and families that you spoke with in your reporting. I'm just curious to hear a little bit more about that.

AK: That's exactly right and I think what the major problems and the travesties and tragedies of the pandemic was a false sense of solidarity because people were withdrawn – well a proportion of people – were withdrawn into their homes. And they were privileged enough to be able to work from home. I was one of them and to get things delivered and not have to sort of encounter the pandemic and then there was half or more of the workforce actually going out to work every day and working in frontline situations and exposed to the dangers of the pandemic. So that right there really kind of divided families and divided communities and what we really don't spend enough time thinking about is that the solution – a quote unquote solution – that we came to with closing schools was predicated on the idea that you would have a custodial parent at home with the time to watch a kid plus an internet connection and a computer to connect to remote learning and that just wasn't the case. I mean here in New York City we have 1 in 10 children in the public school system who are housing insecure or homeless, so right there, we have over 51% of kids in the public school system are low income and not all of them are essential workers but a lot of them are, so then you have older siblings teenagers who are home trying to watch kids, you have families that are food insecure, you have the family that I followed in California where the mother is cleaning hotel rooms for a living and with the kindergarten shutdown, her daughter is coming to work with her on the city bus and she's experiencing Kindergarten such as it is on her mother's phone. So clearly we didn't plan for that eventuality. We didn't do enough to cover for that eventuality and way too many kids suffered as a result.

CC: I know it's just had such a huge impact on the whole educational system and in our work. We think a lot about places and try to make places that work better and obviously a school is a really important place, not only for our children but for our whole communities and we've done a lot of thinking about active learning – about the benefit of kids in terms of being able to be in a space and be able to move and engage with their classmates and their surroundings and that kind of thing. I'm curious about the work that you did. Do you know what was the impact that you saw on kids who were suddenly shifted from learning in place to learning online without that ability to be an active kid?

AK: It's never been more important and it's this work that is so important now because this is exactly what kids were deprived of and it really runs the gamut. I mean kids that were slower to walk or hit their physical milestones because they're not getting in-person playtime in an enriched environment. Jonah who's eleven years old and who loves to play tag with his friends. He loves to go on his Razor scooter and he deals with autism and dyslexia.

Physically being in front of the computer made him violent. I mean he didn't have the ability to sit still and it just frustrated him so much that it was daily battles and just to think about the fact that San Francisco padlocked its outdoor parks. You know, so he couldn't even go out and have that physical activity. Even when it was obviously very safe to do so, that was a decision that was not made with children like him in mind. The loss of that place-based learning, that physical learning was really acutely felt I think all across the board and particularly for our kids who might be developing a little bit differently.

CC: My youngest son was in University but has ADHD and for him the online learning experience was rough. There were things that he could do to compensate and had a lot of accommodations but it was really difficult. So I'm curious, what do you see as the advantages of bringing – whether it's K-12 or higher education – students to a physical campus? How do they benefit from learning in the kind of formal or informal ways that we learn on campuses?

AK: This is such a strong question right now because obviously colleges had to weigh the benefits and the dangers of in-person learning but I would really point to the mental health impacts. It was in June of 2020 that I started hearing directly from clinicians that work with young people to make sure that I knew as a reporter that the kids are not okay, specifically some of the clinicians explained to me how learning is so social. It's so driven by the intersection of the conversations between peers as well as teachers and that's how we find our motivation. That's how we experience our curiosity. That's how we explore ideas and so some of that is possible with a concerted effort in a virtual environment but the informal learning – the bumping into people on campus – the kind of learning that takes place in the art gallery or in the Science lab or even at the gym or at the cafeteria you know where there's informal conversations and all of that is very very hard to replicate in an online environment.

CC: We talk about that a lot for grownups as well. How are we figuring out what the future is going to be? So we can keep people, as you're saying, learning. Learning, ideally, is something that is happening as a lifelong experience for all of us. So, how do we figure that out in this new era of hybrid learning and hybrid working? I want to just go back and maybe pull on a couple examples that you wrote about in terms of this idea of active or physical learning. I know there were some things that you looked at in terms of outdoor experiences – some of the things that I think they did in your hometown of New Orleans.

AK: Yeah, this was a really interesting example. There's a charter school network called First Line in New Orleans and they're really well known for their edible schoolyard program.

It's the Alice Waters program and it's the first one outside of California to my knowledge. So not only a school garden but one that's very integrated with a cooking curriculum as well. So they really do a lot of place-based learning there and what happened during the pandemic was the children's museum, The Louisiana Children's Museum and City Park in New Orleans was closed to visitors and so they were able to strike a deal where they could bring in their pre-k and Kindergarten students to learn inside the museum so they spent a school year in this incredibly enriched, creative environment with all of these hands on opportunities with lots of space for the kids to spread out and it was such an innovative way to, you know, make lemonade out of lemons moments. Which is super cool for those kids. It does make me angry that we didn't get more creative and do that all over the country because everyone has these spaces. I did talk to the YMCA, for example, they operated emergency child cares for kids starting in March 2020 with the shutdown and they use their entire building not just the place that was designated for kids programming but they would use the basketball court, they would use the boardrooms, they would use anything that they had so that they'd had enough space so there were these kinds of experiments going on but we just we needed way more of them.

CC: They are interesting in terms of pointing to where things might be able to go in the future, with higher adoption. The other thing I wanted to ask about is from an educator perspective. I've always said that I could never be a teacher. It's so hard. It just looks so hard and you know during the pandemic the stress that it had to place on educators and the educational system had to be really high and I'm just wondering how this is all shaking out? How has the pandemic really changed the work of education and educators in particular?

AK: I think it's very true. There's been sort of a roller coaster I would say that you know prior to the pandemic our status quo in America was that teachers are underpaid for their education level. And they don't experience the full amount of respect that is due that some other cultures give to public school teachers. But there's a compensation which is that there are close relationships between public school teachers and the parents that they serve and most parents say that they're happy with their kids' schools. They're happy with their kids' teachers. So, it was an uneasy bargain but it was something that allowed teachers to stay on the job. Then, right at the beginning of the pandemic there was this outpouring of accolades for teachers and a recognition of their jobs and how hard their jobs are and then that was replaced with this sense of exasperation and frustration where parents felt like schools aren't opening. They felt like the unions were opposing it and then there was this really interesting thing where the Zoom school provided a window into the classroom and parents could see much more closely. I mean teachers work in isolation generally and that's not a great thing. We prefer to have professionals be able to collaborate. But you know some parents didn't like what they heard when they overheard teachers teaching and so there's this mobilization of extremist activists to kind of attack teachers, to attack schools, attack libraries, which lends this feeling of being very beleaguered and it's hard to resolve. What's happening now is there are some shortages in some positions. There are some early retirements. There are people rethinking going into the teaching profession, which is dangerous down the road because how do we get a younger more diverse teaching force? There's a need for I think a broader reckoning and being able to have the nuance to say I recognize that teachers worked incredibly hard during the pandemic and it didn't always have the results that we wanted but that doesn't mean that they weren't working incredibly hard. So how do you square that circle?

CC: Where do you think we are now in terms of the well-being of educators and then talk about the well-being of learners.

AK: I think it's a mixed picture around the country. First of all, there's been a large infusion of federal money, which a lot of schools and states have used to increase teacher pay and make it more competitive which they need to do in this labor market. But it's temporary so 2024 is when most of that money is set to expire and then what's also been happening is that public school enrollment has been going down in many places. There can be some hard decisions to make as far as staffing goes. There's also a different recognition of needs. The ratio of counselors to students has been way too high for a very long time. There aren't enough mental Health professionals in our schools. And this is a mental health crisis that we're living through so we need those people. There's a pipeline issue. They need to get trained similarly with special education specialists because there's so many kids who didn't get the services that they needed. Now they need to get more services. Compensatory Services. And then think about IT. We know that this online stuff isn't going away and schools need to have IT professionals as well and there's also some changes in parent relationships. So some schools pivoted into having full time parent coordinators or spending more time on that family relationship which I think is really important. Not only are staff levels changing, staff needs are changing. Then you have on the other hand, who is going to be a teacher right? There was a national poll about the attitudes for public schooling and they're one of the sources of this very robust finding that families like their public schools. They give their local public schools a high rating. However, this year they asked if you want your child to be a public school teacher and most people said no.

CC: That makes so much sense because I just feel like every time I turn on the news, the teachers, the librarians are getting a lot of pushback and I thought it was a tough job before the pandemic! I'm just curious because it feels like in life, we've all kind of gone: "Oh the pandemic is over. Everything just goes back to normal right?: Are things back to normal for educators? Or are there people still in crisis?"

AK: Every time I gave a presentation I asked people to rate themselves on a scale from struggling to languishing to thriving and languishing is really this midpoint where you're not in an active crisis but neither are you feeling 100% and I would say that it's at the midpoint. It's that some days it's better, but you know then you go into flu season or over winter break and it's like oh we know how this feels – being at home having to cancel your plans and just give up on whatever you were trying to do. I think it's fair to say languishing. I see individual communities rallying around their public school teachers. I do see that as much as there is this very combative stuff that makes headlines, there are a lot more quiet access of solidarity and bridge building and when at the bottom line is you know most American children go to public schools and most families want to have positive relationships with the adults that have care of their children every day They don't want to antagonize them and vice versa because in the end of the day your teacher and your public school and the parent shares big picture goals. They want what's best for kids and so there's a lot to build on there and I believe I'm optimistic that things can improve.

CC: What do you think about learners? Where do you feel like they're at, at this stage?

AK: To me the really big drama and the thing that I'm watching is not test scores right? It's so intangible. Quality of engagement with learning, that's part of your self-concept and how you think about the future and your hope for the planet and so the indicator that I'm so nervous about is a survey that was done the past fall that found 51% of teenagers were considering a 4 year degree and that's a 20 point drop since May 2020. 51%, and college aspiration had been really high in that 70-80% range

CC: Wow! Yeah...

AK: For a long time. It's not always connected to actual college readiness but I think that's a sea change and you see that there's been an actual drop of 20% into community college enrollment. I mean that's massive. I don't worry about standardized test scores, I worry about kids thinking about their futures and thinking about what their plans are. And yeah I don't I mean not everybody has to go to four year college. There are so many different opportunities out there. But what is their path? What are they going to be doing if it's not a 4 year college?

CC: Right? I agree. And you know what? What you just said really worried me – when you talked about the community college because a lot of times that's a pathway for a lot of people to be able to shift their their career and maybe they're not going to do a 4 year program but that's a little worrisome when it starts impacting the community college level. I want to switch topics a little bit and just talk because we touched on this earlier but didn't go as deep on this whole idea about online learning and higher education experiences. I'm just curious what you're seeing about how that's playing out in the near term? What do you think is likely to happen from the long term experience in terms of adopting this kind of hybrid learning experience?

AK: Clearly we're at a new milestone in the adoption of online learning. I don't think there's going to be hardly a higher education student that's not going to have some portion of their degree earned online. It's just going to be the norm. What I'm concerned about or what I see as a design challenge for existing institutions is there's a mismatch between the reasons that students adopt online learning and the actual best affordances of online learning so students adopt online learning because of convenience and cost, but the affordances of online learning favor very self-directed self-motivated learners who already have kind of a support system in place and it can be very good for the things that it's good for. But how do we ensure that students are making those choices? Based on what's likely to find the most successful versus they just need to do what they need to do for their lives? I think that's really the challenge and so whether that's how you approach counseling or how you approach marketing or just a program design in and of itself making sure that there's accountability built in, making sure that students form cohorts and relate to their fellow students and peers. The onus is on those who offer online learning to make sure that it's not going to be the student's fault if the program – if they're not ready for the program. It's about the program being ready for the student.

CC: We spend a lot of time thinking about the actual physical space, here this online learning is happening and what kind of experiences we really need to see. We've been studying some classroom prototypes recently and really trying to understand what the primary difference is in terms of how those spaces need to operate versus a traditional classroom, and it's not easy. Honestly, it's not easy work for this hybrid collaboration or hybrid experience to be seamless and to have equity for people depending on where they're joining. I'm just curious how you're feeling about that in terms of our physical spaces needing to do something different, from what you've learned.

AK: It's incredibly hard and I had one teacher describe a hybrid to me as juggling with knives. Where they're teaching students in the classroom and students at home and I had another show me his setup where he was wearing a microphone, wearing his mask, wearing a microphone to talk to the students on the computer and then to talk to the students in the room using a different microphone – it was just so difficult. I don't think that there are any perfect answers but the idea is not going away. It's possible that there are technological advances that can help with the setup. I mean I've definitely been in situations where if you have the person on a large screen and their audio is good, they're on a level playing field with the people in the room. I think it can be more helpful if there's a robust text chat that can be simultaneous and feel like there's another channel where the people can chime in and be on the same page. I had a very funny experience where I spoke. Actually it happened twice as well. I was the only remote speaker so people were gathering in person. So it's hybrid in the sense that I'm beaming in and then I was to give a live talk and then I met one of the people in person like a couple of months later and she gave me this big hug. I am like I don't know who you are and then she realized that oh, I met you but you didn't meet me! But we're going to keep working with it and I mean it as much as it felt weird to see people walking on the street talking to no one and now it's totally normal I think that we're going to, and people are incredibly adaptable.

CC: Right? Oh that's funny!

AK: Especially socially. We're going I think we're going to figure it out. We're going to continue to figure it out.

CC: Before I let you go I do want to go back to some of the stories that you told in your book because they really were pretty riveting and one that really struck me was in North Carolina. There was a great example of a district that really had kids as you had mentioned earlier. Some kids had shifted out of the classroom not just to stay home and watch movies and play video games but they actually went to work and I'm just wondering if you could talk a little bit about that story and what that community did.

AK: Gilver County is one of the largest school districts actually in North Carolina and it did have a large number of students who drifted into paid work, rather than be able to be connected to remote learning and so they lost a whole lot of ground and that was for very, very basic economic reasons. But that district embarked on such a concerted effort to get those kids back into school. This is a district where there's a hundred languages spoken. I mean it's rivaling New York city but I mean we have this diversity now all over the country. So they went door to door. They held open houses where they made sure that people knew that they were welcome back in school and then they started this thing called learning hub where they got outside funding for this. The notion of it was – and they did include on the weekends – so there were some kids who were like “I'm still working during the week but on the weekend I'm going to try and just come and catch up.” But during the school week, they have this after school program and it is the same teachers from the school day which is a big ask for those teachers to stay after to help kids with whatever they need help with when they catch up. And they make it really inviting. There's a bus home. There's dinner and in fact, it's so inviting that there were kids there I was really surprised to see that had straight A's that come to the after school just to hang out with their friends and to help their friends. Because that's the culture of the school and it's actually like a fun place to be. It's a safe place to be and you can go over to the basketball gym and play basketball for a while and come back and the kids are really making progress and what it really is – I mean obviously it helps to have extra time – but it inspired the kids to feel like they're not failures and like they can make progress and they can succeed.

CC: Yeah, and it's just such a great example of community – not just the village, the town, but the sense of community that the kids created and helped facilitate among themselves. Anya. This has just been a great conversation. I feel like I could talk to you for a few more hours. I really appreciate you joining us today. So thank you for sharing your work with us.

AK: Thank you so much for your interest. I really appreciate it.

CC: After talking with Anya, I wanted to talk to Andrew Kim. He's a director with Steelcase Workspace Futures which does research on the future of work and educational environments. Andrew, thank you for joining me and talking about this. I really appreciate you being here.

Andrew Kim: Thanks for inviting me. It's great having this opportunity. I really appreciated Anya's comments.

CC: I really liked what she talked about with learning being social. It's driven by conversations between learners and educators and she was saying a lot about how we find our motivation. I'm curious if you could talk about what we could do to think about spaces that would help encourage that peer to peer and social learning experience.

Andrew Kim: We definitely believe that learning is a social experience. There are lots of ways to promote those types of social experiences we want to have in the built environment. Within the classroom you can think about certain types of learning. Classes are still designed where students are looking at the backs of students heads, but with active learning design principles you're thinking of better sight lines to others as you're looking to content or how can students rotate in their chairs to have better interaction with their neighbor or help create more group type settings within the space. Or think about side spaces – maybe students want to connect with instructors before or after class – is there a lounge space in the corner where they can have coffee or a more relaxed type of conversation. There's other spaces on campus to think about. There are hallways. We often call hallways, hallways of misery because you see students sitting on the floor with their materials. How do you activate that space? How do you create spaces where students can interact with other students before or after class? There are a lot of outdoor spaces on campus and schools often want to activate that space and allow for moments of interaction with others so there are lots of ways of supporting students. Or even looking at the types of interests students have and how do you create spaces that support their interests and allow them to interact. Think about co curricular activities. Esports would be a great example. Esports is a very popular activity among students. How can you create Esports settings not only for the teams but for students who have a casual interest and how can they have interaction with other students as they're playing games. I think it's exciting to think about the different types of social experiences.

CC: You're describing this range of spaces outside of what we might think of a traditional classroom. It's hard to have interaction with peers when you're looking at the back of their heads – that's a really good insight. Just being able to improve sight lines and leverage diverse spaces – that's helpful. Andrew, another we talked about with Anya was hybrid learning and how different that is from the traditional ways we've approached learning. I know you've studied this a lot and have done different prototypes and tried different things. What are some of the key takeaways you can share about making hybrid learning a better experience?

Andrew Kim: I'm glad Anya brought that up when you were speaking with her. Hybrid experiences are very challenging for the instructor and they often have divided attention between the roomies and zoomies.

CC: I love that! Roomies and Zoomies.

Andrew Kim: Beyond just creating a simple, easy system that can be started up with a single click, there's other things to think about when it comes to the environment. The acoustical quality of the room is really key. We think about the phrase 'hear me, see me,' so how do you create a quality acoustic experience? What can you do to the wall? Are there wall tiles that can be placed that limit reverberation? That would help in terms of the experience. And think about the number of displays and separating content from people, and then having displays on the front and back so the instructor can see both the people in the room and the zoomies. One thing we've noticed with hybrid is there is a tendency to be more fixed. Everyone wants to stay within the camera view. I think having flexible active learning furniture is key to adjust that tension in the space and allow people to move naturally and not be so fatigued. Another key principle is pixels and pencils. Think about analog and digital tools. With analog, thinking about the speed of thought tools like whiteboards or post it notes, that helps to promote movement in the space and the educator can walk around and move their arms around as they're writing – like having whiteboard space and that's some of the feedback we got. In our hybrid spaces, the whiteboard spaces were some of the ones the students liked the best.

CC: You're right. When you're in hybrid collaboration sessions at work, you have a tendency to be stationary because of the tendency to want to see and be seen. Andrew, I feel like you've given us some good things to think about that are memorable – like roomies and zoomies. And hear me, see me, as well as pixels and pencils. That's great! So thank you so much for spending time with me today, just to kind of process what we heard from Anya.

Andrew Kim: Thanks for inviting me, it was great to have the conversation.

CC: Thank you for being here with us. If you enjoyed this conversation – please rate or review it, so more people can find it and visit us at steelcase.com/research to sign up for weekly updates on workplace research, insights and design ideas delivered to your inbox.

RC: Join us next week for our conversation with Dr. Jean Twenge. Jean is an expert on the generations. We're going to focus on Gen Z and ask her why this generation is so different? How can we work better together? And what Gen Z really wants in the workplace? You don't want to miss this conversation.

CC: We hope you join us. Thanks again for being here – and we hope your day at work tomorrow is just a little bit better.

CREDITS

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